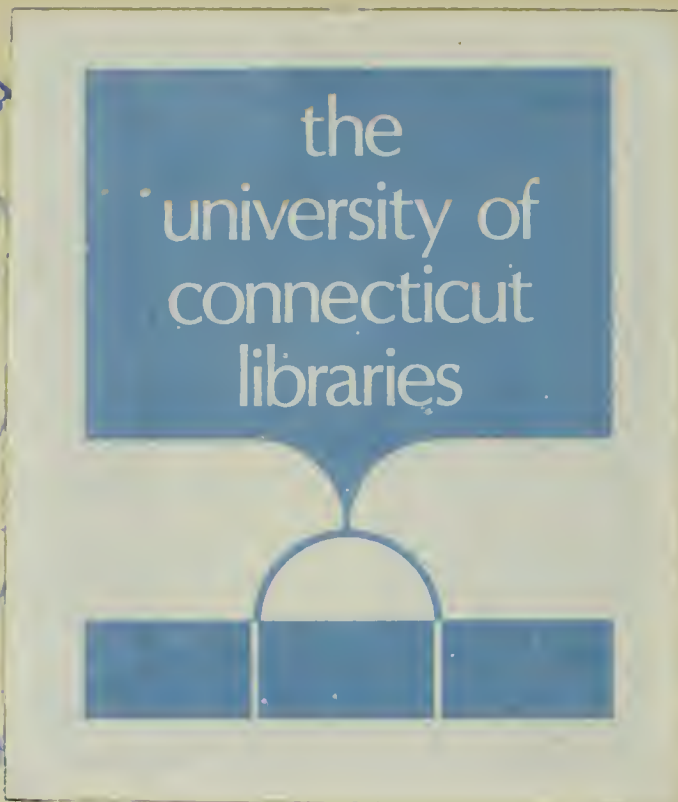


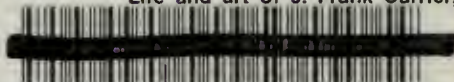
Frank Currier



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Life and art of J. Frank Currier,



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To

Mr. & Mrs. Edmund Burke Thompson

with the kindest
regards

of
Nelson C. White

July 5th 1943



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THE
LIFE AND ART OF
J. FRANK CURRIER



J. FRANK CURRIER

THE
LIFE AND ART OF
J. FRANK CURRIER

BY
NELSON C. WHITE



PRIVATELY PRINTED
AT THE RIVERSIDE PRESS, CAMBRIDGE
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TO
AIDA

*Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,
Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will,
But his hard human pulse is throbbing still
With the sure strength that fearless truth endows.
In spite of all fine science disavows,
Of his plain excellence and stubborn skill
There yet remains what fashion cannot kill,
Though years have thinned the laurel from his brows.*

(From 'George Crabbe,' by
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON)

PREFACE

IN WRITING this book I must first of all acknowledge my debt to Miss Elizabeth C. Currier, Currier's daughter, for facts and material, for the reminiscences of her father which she has written for me, and for much labor and research, without which the work would have been impossible. A painter herself, as well as a musician, she was particularly fitted to interpret her father's genius. Above all, I have to thank her for her constant sympathy and encouragement.

I am also indebted to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Bertram Currier, her children, and to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Currier, Currier's brother and sister-in-law, for permission to use material in their possession.

Mr. Edward A. Bell has proved a mine of wealth, with his recollections, gifts of works by Currier himself, and his assistance in every way.

To Mr. Aloysius Weimer of Detroit, I am under an embarrassing debt of obligation. Some months before I began my research, Mr. Weimer became interested in Currier, and, unaware of my project, he wrote a master's thesis ¹ on the subject for New York University. When he heard of my own enterprise, he magnanimously presented me with all of his notes, which he had collected with the painstaking care of an artist and scholar. This gift has saved me much time and labor, and it must be distinctly noted here that Mr. Weimer

¹ 'J. Frank Currier,' by Aloysius G. Weimer, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at New York University. October, 1935.

was the first to attempt to revive an interest in Currier and his art by way of writing and scholarship.

Mr. Horace Burdick, the artist, of Malden, Massachusetts, now living at the age of ninety-two, a year younger than Currier, knew him before he went to Europe and in Boston after his return. He, too, has given me of his time unsparingly and has helped me to verify dates with his diaries as well as commenting upon Currier's personality and art.

Mr. Thomas C. Howe, Jr., Assistant Director of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, has been a great help to me in tracing pictures, letters, and other data relating to Currier.

Mrs. Mabel Withrow, niece of Currier's pupil, Miss Evelyn A. Withrow, has graciously allowed me to use Currier's letters to her aunt, and put me in possession of much valuable material.

In addition, I wish to acknowledge the invaluable criticism of Mr. Royal Cortissoz, and the constant help of my father, Henry C. White.

I am also indebted to Mr. W. J. Baer, Miss Constance Forsyth, daughter of Currier's artist friend, William Forsyth, Mr. Norbert Heermann, Professor Carl Marr of Munich, Mr. Fritz Endell, Mr. E. Weyhe, Mrs. John N. Carey of Indianapolis, Mr. Irving R. Wiles, Mr. Robert Vose, Mr. Robert Macbeth, Mr. Dwight Blaney, Mr. Louis W. Alston, Mr. Paul Vanderbilt, Mr. and Mrs. Sterling Turner of Salem, Mr. Robert MacIntyre, Mr. Reginald Poland, director of the San Diego Museum, Mr. Francis Robinson of the Cincinnati Museum, Mr. E. C. Babcock of the Babcock Galleries of New York, the Messrs. E. and A. Milch and the Museums in Detroit, Chicago, Indianapolis, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, San Francisco, San Diego, and St. Louis.

I also wish to thank Houghton Mifflin Company, L. C. Page and Company, D. Appleton-Century Company, and Charles Scribner's Sons for their kind permission to quote from books they have published.

NELSON C. WHITE

WATERFORD, CONNECTICUT

July, 1936

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NYMPHENBURGER STRASSE

THE
LIFE AND ART OF
J. FRANK CURRIER

CHAPTER I

ANCESTRY, BOYHOOD, AND YOUTH

JOSEPH FRANK CURRIER was born in Boston, Massachusetts, November 21, 1843. The house is not known, but is supposed to have been in what was then called the 'South End' of the city. Research in church and municipal archives yields no record of his birth or baptism, and there has been some difference of opinion about the day and month. But as November 21, 1843, was given by Currier himself several times, it is probably the correct date.

His father, Joseph Stephen Currier, came from Boothbay, Maine, though there is no record of his birth there. The Currier family, who were of English, Scottish, and French descent, had lived for several generations in Vermont and New Hampshire. His mother, Caroline C. Barrows of New Hampshire, was of English ancestry. Of this marriage there were two children: J. Frank, the subject of this biography, and a younger son, Charles H., who is still living in Roxbury, Massachusetts.

Currier's father was a stone-cutter and a maker of marble mantels. His business was located for a time in Beverly Street, Boston. He not only excelled in his craft, but was also a thrifty and practical man, and so prospered in his business that at forty he was able to retire with a modest fortune. He bought real estate in Boston, which increased in value and brought him a permanent and dependable income.

Unlike the fathers of some painters, Joseph Currier was sympathetic with his artist son. He did not despise the artistic or the musical. In fact, he was an amateur flute-player himself, and it is probable that from his father Currier inherited some of his talent for music as well as a measure of his sense of form; for to be a good carver of stone is to be a potential sculptor.

While it is difficult to find much about Currier's mother, from all accounts she was a fine woman. There is a tradition in the family, however, that she had a rather austere personality, and from this we may infer that Currier inherited from her something of his seriousness and high purpose. Though it is difficult to identify derivative traits, everyone seems to agree that Currier was unique in his family.

When Frank was ten years old, the Curriers moved to Cambridgeport, Vermont, for four years, where Currier senior cut soapstone in the quarries. They then moved to Roxbury, a suburb of Boston, soon to be incorporated with the city, where Currier's father built a house at 190 Warren Street. It is still standing, and is now occupied by Mr. Charles H. Currier. Frank lived the life of a normal boy, attending school in Boston, Cambridgeport, and Roxbury, hunting and fishing on his holidays, flying kites, rowing on the rivers, and drifting in and out of his father's marble yard. He attended high school and finished his course with credit, for, although we have no definite record of his career as a student, his brother recalls that he was always regarded as a 'bright fellow.'

In these chaotic days of rapidly changing manners, it is somewhat difficult to picture the domestic life of an American family of the fifties and sixties. Although it probably was not luxurious, we may assume there was, besides modest comfort,

a more universal respect for things of the mind and spirit than in this materialistic era. The family were church-goers, but they were Unitarians, the most liberal sect of the day, and attended what was then known as 'Doctor Putnam's Church,' the fine Colonial structure which now stands at Dudley and Putnam Streets in Roxbury. This church was founded by the Reverend John Eliot, the famous apostle to the Indians. It was during a service here that young Currier rescued his future wife from a panic caused by a suspected fire, catching her as she jumped from one of the windows. But there is no further record of their acquaintance until they met later in Europe. Of this period we know but little except that the family lived the serene life of the Boston of those days, which must have left the boy a fine legacy — the memory of a happy unclouded childhood.

When he was about sixteen he tried stone-cutting for a time, but was repelled by the resisting medium and gave it up. He then worked in a bank in Boston, from about 1862 to 1865, when he kept a diary which gives more of an insight into what he was doing than into what he was thinking. He notes his duties as a clerk, records the return of the troops from the Civil War, visits a cousin who is a sailor at the Navy Yard, and occasionally has glimpses into a picture gallery. He spends his evenings usually with his family, playing checkers or euchre, and in his spare time reads, draws, or practices on the piano. In the early spring he gets the hotbeds ready and prepares for the flower garden, for from the first he shows a passion for nature, responsive to the seasons, wind, weather, and sky with the instinct of a nascent landscape painter. At some period in his adolescence he came upon the books of Emerson and Thoreau — a notable event, for these writers inspired

and sustained him all his life. In his first European diaries he refers to Thoreau more than to anyone else. Although Currier was an earnest and idealistic youth, there was nothing of the prig about him. But as yet we find no trace of the emotional extremes from exaltation to depression which were to mark his maturity.

During his banking apprenticeship he attended the evening classes of the Lowell Institute in Boston, said to be the first in America where elementary drawing was studied from real objects, instead of from other drawings and reproductions. The art department was supervised and taught by George Hollingsworth and William F. Carlton, and it was here that Currier received his first systematic instruction in drawing.

About 1864 the elder Currier began manufacturing marble mantels, and Frank left the bank to assist his father in the new enterprise, but at some time between 1865 and 1869 he decided that he wished to study art. There is an unverified tradition that he studied with William Morris Hunt, who was then the reigning artistic personality in Boston. Mr. Burdick, his friend and fellow student, does not recall it; but as Hunt's first studio in Boston was in the Highland Hall Building on the corner of Walnut Avenue and Warren Street, Roxbury, and as in 1864 he fitted up a studio in the old Mercantile Building on Summer Street, it is quite possible that Currier did come in contact with Hunt's magnetic and fertilizing influence. Mr. Weimer suggests that Currier's love of J. F. Millet's work may be an inheritance from Hunt, which is not unlikely. He is known to have received instruction from Samuel Gerry, who was a pleasing landscape painter of the older school, whose works have more fluency and charm of color than many of his American contemporaries.



LANDSCAPE

But probably the most important artistic influence upon Currier before he went to Europe was George Fuller. The Currier family went to Deerfield, Massachusetts, for two summers in the late sixties, and it was there that he met Fuller, who was painting at intervals of leisure from his tobacco farming, although he did not make his belated popular success in Boston until 1876. Fuller painted landscape nearly as often as the figure, and understood the principles of art much better than many of his contemporaries who had had a more thorough training. It was a fortunate meeting, for Fuller was as good a mentor as young Currier could have found.

The youth now began to draw and paint landscape, and a number of his early pictures are still in existence to testify to the sound instruction he received. While some of them are rather tight and hard, they all show an exceptional grasp of values and big relations, and in their delicate elaboration of form are never fussy or confused. They indicate, in fact, the beginning of an unusual talent and are, in their own way, remarkably mature. This severe grounding in form prepared him well for the European schools and for the freedom of his later work. And even these early pictures reveal the same fidelity to nature that is so conspicuous in his later and broader style. In a diary written in Antwerp Currier recalls some of his sketches made in Deerfield and says they were 'in the right direction.' So our artist made a good start, without the handicap of an unsympathetic family, and he advanced rapidly in his studies, although, except for Hunt and Fuller, there was then very little of the artistic influence of Europe in Boston. Currier also made friends with other young students, among them Frank Millet, J. Wells Champney, and Horace Burdick.

Currier senior had now prospered in his new business and

was evidently able and willing to dispense with Frank's help, to the end that the boy should fulfill his destiny and develop his talents. So, with this encouragement, he sailed on April 3, 1869, from Boston to Antwerp, not to return to America until 1898.

CHAPTER II

STUDENT YEARS

WHY Currier went first to Antwerp we do not know, but it was not a bad choice. Presumably he came to Belgium by way of England, for he speaks in his diary of admiring Turner's *Liber Studiorum* at South Kensington, and this implies at least a short stay there.

Flemish art was then in transition from the painting of conventional historical pictures to more informal contemporary scenes. Nicaise de Keyser, an instructor in the Academy in Antwerp, 1869, was a painter of these historical subjects, although his work shows the influence of Rubens and has a more fluent style. Hendrik Leys (1815–69) was also an artist whose influence helped much to liberate the painting of Belgium from its historical shackles.

Antoine Wiertz (1806–65), another Belgian, was a tempestuous genius, whose work, with all its morbidity of subject and straining after effect, was inspired by Rubens and the old masters. It is well to note here the influence of Wiertz, who, unknown in this country, is still admired in Belgium, where in Brussels a museum of his works is maintained by the Government. Currier admired Wiertz, both in his painting and in his writing on the subject of composition, and no doubt Wiertz's example was a great help in freeing Currier from the academic point of view. We must take it for granted, of course, that the supreme examples of Rubens in Antwerp also had their way with him.

From the time he arrived in Antwerp in 1869 to the early spring of 1870, Currier worked diligently in the Royal Academy, drawing from the cast and, it is said, also painting from it, so that he might keep the 'feel of the brush.' His cast drawings are as fine as any I have ever seen in the academic manner. They must indeed have equalled any in the school, so impeccable are they in their firm grasp of form and delicate modeling. It is startling to glance from Currier's academic work to some of his later dashing impressions of the figure or of landscape. But underneath the freedom even of these is still a strong feeling for structure, which was grounded in the early studies and which never disappeared. He also drew from the figure in Antwerp, but, so far as we know, he never painted from it there.

As we have seen, he soon responded to the liberating influences about him, and it was during his stay in Antwerp that he produced several of his most beautiful landscapes, a series of windmill subjects, which, as a step from his landscapes of a few years before, in America, are remarkable. They suggest slightly the work of Boudin, though a trifle romanticized. Three of these and a photograph of one other, which has disappeared, are in existence, owned by the Currier family.

These pictures show that Currier responded at once to the stirring scene about him — the fine old seaport of Antwerp, the river Scheldt with its crowded shipping, the estuaries and canals, and, above it all, the majestic, ever-changing skies of the Netherlands, with their warm gray shadows, creamy lights, and vistas into the turquoise blue of the upper heavens.

While in Antwerp Currier kept a diary which is a valuable clue to his life at this period. It gives us a vivid insight into his temperament, and is the first evidence of that brooding in-



WINDMILLS. ANTWERP

tropection and the quick changes of mood which finally became so characteristic of him. Youth is a time of self-questioning, especially for young artists and poets, who do not always assimilate their first impressions. Currier, however, at twenty-seven, was exceptionally sensitive and unusually mature. At his age few young painters are as philosophic. I quote from some of his entries of 1870.

March 8th

‘I am so troubled in mind that I cannot work. A voice has been urging me for days, drop the figure; you are not fitted for it. It will lead you a life of trouble and vexation. You will simply be striving for that which you never can attain. Your year’s work has not been lost. It has done you good. Go back to that which I think you can do with some credit, and that which you do will do more good to others, being more perfect.’

March 9th — evening

‘I have been walking along the quai seeing the masts of the boats come up against the sky.

‘It has been wet and gloomy all day, but the clouds broke away enough, as I stood watching, to show where the sun went down. A long bank stretched out, tossed into more ragged form in places — guarding the horizon.

‘Looking up to the stars and moon it seemed I had never seen a clearer atmosphere. The light was like silver. Everything appeared small but wonderfully clear and distinct, and all so quiet, in strong contrast with the ragged, restless rain clouds hurrying across it. The boats hugging together for warmth, I suppose, for the wind was cool, seemed so sturdy and full of faith that I gained strength in standing near them.

Lights from the small hatchway at the stern told of homes where hearts could love and suffer as elsewhere.'

After another period of characteristic self-questioning and discussion with a friend, he writes on March 18, evening:

'... One thing I am certain of. I am calmer than I have been for a long time. It is strange but the academic here has been swept entirely from me. All that I have experienced there seems so dim and misty that I can hardly bring myself to the realization of the fact that I have been immured there for a year.

'I hear the hills and trees of my country murmuring with joyous voices. The laughing brooks go tumbling and gurgling to the broad smiling river. This gentle wind that sweeps through me bends me as it does the reeds along the banks and I gaze down into the clear waters and see my naked feet even as they do, trying to run away with the swift eddies. This wind has told it all and Nature is overjoyed to hear of my good resolutions.'

At length, sometime in April, 1870, he decided to go to Paris, and, after some doubts about his leaving Antwerp and devoting himself to landscape, he writes of a happy trip to Barbizon and a stimulating visit with his friend Chandler,¹ the architect, who gives him lessons in vegetarianism which he tries for a while as an experiment. Chandler urges him not to desert landscape and says, 'I shall want you to put a large landscape fresco in some of my churches that I am going to build.' He writes that he

¹ Theophilus P. Chandler, Jr. (1845-1928), was a distinguished architect of churches and public buildings. Born in Boston, he studied in Paris and returned to America to settle in Philadelphia, where he organized and became the first director of the School of Architecture of the University of Pennsylvania.

wishes he could have Chandler near him. 'He would steady me in some of my morbid, restless ways.'

He then pictures to himself his ideal of a house in the country:

'It shall be so arranged that when I open the back door and the front, the wind can make a clean sweep, carrying out all impurities of both body and mind. If I can possibly devise some way to tip the house to any needed angle so that the sun at all hours can fill the whole interior, I will. I think of something better — it shall face the sun, the two doors opposite each other — at sunrise we will flood it full for the day, and again at sunset for the night. . . . My studio shall be wherever some beautiful thought in nature for a time holds me. I think I will have a "Walden" near by to bathe in. If with all these things I cannot keep a clear conscience and be at peace, I shall despair of myself.'

He stayed a week or two in Paris, then, possibly, through the influence of some of his friends, he decided to spend the spring and summer of 1870 at Écouen, a little town about ten miles directly north of Paris, on a hill not far from the valley of the Oise. He soon found himself a cottage and was happy again in the prospect of devoting himself at last to landscape. He settled there on the ninth of May, 1870, and, with occasional visits from his friends, appeared to enjoy the new life, although he began to suffer from recurring spells of melancholy.

The following description, written in May, 1870, is prophetic of his future study of the sky.

'I awoke with a start, very early and sat up in bed, then trembled and hurriedly and nervously went to the window to seek some explanation of the weird, wonderful sky that was

looking in upon me. The shock of some terrible coming moment, that it gave me, has not left me yet. I went into the room that looks towards the east. Such a mighty miracle was being performed that I fairly held my breath to witness it. The clouds like restless spirits were surging down to the horizon and massing themselves in high air way up to the zenith — to see and assist at the first rising of the sun. In countless ranks they pressed forward down to the red golden line at the horizon in heaved and twisted forms, with eager intent driven restlessly on by yet higher weary, undefined spirits in the rear. In purple — in broad wet splashes — the sky that indescribable grey — lower down the crimson, then the golden streak. I have learned one thing — 'tis in the early morning and at eve that Nature is at her best and does her greatest work.'

On May 12, 1870, he writes:

'I shouldered my duds and made for the fields, a morning so bright and breezy with hurrying, gathering clouds — the fluttering of the leaves and sunlight glancing through them — all Nature so cool and clean after her bath, the birds so fully alive to all this and keeping up a constant twittering. I could not resist it. My heart was soon as full of joy as the birds. So hearty a welcome back to my old studies by Nature made me forget all my troubles, and I sat down to make a sketch — sat down in my new *old* life quite contented.

'Once home I looked at my work to see if it contained anything good. I found it to lack strength and meaning. I put color on with too little attention, hoping it may come right, and I muddle my tones too much upon the palette. Yet I feel encouraged, I hardly know why, and had a sort of glimmering hope ahead that holds me together.



CURRIER IN ANTWERP

‘If I could learn to sketch well under my umbrella I should take much real pleasure in it. Well, we will wait and see. I must make some large and careful drawings.’

During his stay in Écouen, Currier visited the Danish painter August Schenck (1828–1901), whose story-telling pictures of sheep in snowstorms have not outlived their vogue. Schenck, however, was a painter who knew his trade, and although Currier was perhaps unduly awed by his position in the art world, Schenck gave him a warm welcome, some good advice about the need of diligence, and confirmed him in his resolution to study Nature at first hand for the time being.

He then writes on May 13, 1870:

‘... What I must accomplish during my stay at Écouen is power of sketching in masses, quickly and accurately, understandingly, not powers of finishing, to know and apply the laws by which Nature is constantly influenced. I must always regard Nature through the medium of thought, remembering that all material is but the means of expressing an idea.’

On Wednesday, June 1, 1870, he says that he has written to De Keyser in Antwerp about his leaving the school, but despairs of making him realize his reasons and so he writes: ‘I am classed among the bad boys, ...’ and adds, apropos of nothing:

‘I have a saying worth putting down: “Il y a beaucoup de foi à Rome parce que tout le monde en y apporte et personne ne l’emporte.” ... If we could look ahead and see what is to befall us we should not know any better what to do at the present moment than we do now.’

Had it not been for the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in August, 1870, it is problematical whether or not Currier might have continued his studies in Paris. But he left for Munich, probably in August, exactly why we do not know, but very likely because a few other Americans had gone there before.

Munich by this time had supplanted Düsseldorf as the best place to study in Germany, and it was in a fever of artistic activity. For several generations the Bavarian royalty had encouraged painting, and the old Pinakothek was filled with superb examples of the old masters, especially of the Dutch and Flemish schools.

It was an atmosphere unusually stimulating to painters, a place where there was a pervasive and contagious enthusiasm for work. For it was said that there was, with all the student gaiety and high spirits, more seriousness than in Paris. It was a smaller city where all the artistic elements mixed more intimately and there was also a closer relation between master and pupil.

William Henry Fox, a former director of the Brooklyn Museum, in one of the few recent articles devoted to Currier alone, gives us a glimpse of the student life in Munich:

‘Richard Wagner was then at the height of his fame and his works were launched upon an admiring world through the Munich Opera. From the King down, Munich was music mad but it lavished its enthusiasm equally on pictorial art through its many museums, exhibitions, and its schools of instruction. The most noted artists in Germany, and at that day among the best teachers in Europe, taught in the Bavarian Royal Academy and in innumerable private schools. Living was cheap.

The students joyously shared the expenses of their modest studios. In the theatre and other places of amusement, and in many excellent restaurants, special rates were made for them. At the Royal Opera they could listen to the masterpieces of Mozart and Wagner for eighty pfennigs (20c.). The value of instruction in the schools of painting and sculpture at the Academy was intensified in the minds of the students by the severe examinations required to enter the classes. Hundreds clamored at the portals. Only those of obvious talent were passed through. . . . In some cases it took several semesters to enter. The testimony of all of the artists who have since come back is that they worked with furious energy in their classes, many of them impelled by the cognizance of passing time and the consciousness of their shallow purses. . . .

‘It was not all work unalloyed by relaxation. The familiar figures of the Americans were constantly seen strolling in the Englischer Garten and on the shaded banks of the Isar. They associated together on many of the entertaining occasions that the city furnished. With their German comrades they took their parts in the medieval pageants to which Munich was especially given. Many of them were accustomed to frequent the “Union,” a café on the Kaufingerstrasse opposite the celebrated Luitpold Restaurant where Ibsen was often seen. The favorite hour at the “Union” was five o’clock in the afternoon after their classes, and there in an atmosphere of good fellowship, likewise of dense smoke from many Bavarian pipes, they played chess and consumed innumerable cups of coffee, with Frank Currier acting as dean and master of ceremonies.’¹

¹ ‘Frank Currier’s Place,’ by William Henry Fox, *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly*, vol. xviii, January, 1931.

Walter Shirlaw, six years Currier's senior, either just preceded him or went to Munich at about the same time in 1870. David Neal, also Currier's senior by six years, Charles Miller, one year older than Currier, and Toby Rosenthal, five years his junior, were the first of the American students to go to Munich. Neal went in 1862, Rosenthal in 1865, and Miller in 1867. It is not generally understood that these men were the pioneers. Duveneck, who was five years younger than Currier, came in 1870; C. S. Reinhart also came this year. Chase, six years Currier's junior, arrived later, in 1872, together with Frederick Dielman. It is well to mention this chronology precisely, for we are accustomed to hear it said that Chase and Duveneck were the eldest as well as the most prominent students. Many Americans followed in the seventies and eighties: Twachtman, De Camp, Rolshoven, Vinton, Freeman, Wendel, Wenban, Alexander, Ross Turner, Bacher, and later, in the eighties, Bell, Fitz, Steele, McEwen, Baer, Forsyth, Meakin, Nowottny, and Adams. It is a well-established fact, however, that Shirlaw, Currier, and Duveneck were considered the most talented of the older American students in Munich, and both Duveneck and Chase, although they later became far better known than Currier, always spoke of him as a sort of inspired elder brother and helpful mentor of their student days.

As in Antwerp, Currier found painting in a state of transition from the historical conventions to the new informalities and the naturalistic point of view. In 1869 a large number of pictures by Courbet had been exhibited in Munich which attracted much attention. Wilhelm Leibl (1844-1900), who, although a year younger than Currier, was already a mature painter, created a decided sensation with his powerful grasp of the con-



PRIZE DRAWING. MADE IN RAAB'S CLASS

temporary scene, in his admirable portraits of Bavarian peasants in their native setting. It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Leibl on all the American students. He was one of Germany's most distinguished painters. Unlike so much of German art of the time, his work is sober, restrained, dignified, and entirely free from sentimental, grotesque, or morbid fantasy, and derives directly from the finest traditions of the masters. Wilhelm Diez, another German painter, four years older than Currier, was a similar emancipating spirit, for, although he began to teach in the Academy in 1870, he was then considered one of the radicals. Duveneck studied in his painting classes.

In spite of these freer influences in Munich, Currier did not disdain to submit to further disciplinary training. Accordingly, he entered the Royal Academy at once and again began to draw from the cast and the figure. The older, more conservative painters like Piloty were still influential, although they, too, were quite liberal for their generation. George Raab and Alexander Wagner also taught in the Academy, where Currier, together with Shirlaw, studied under both of them, who were their elders but younger than Piloty.

T. H. Bartlett, writing in the *American Art Review* of 1881, in an article on Shirlaw says, 'Shirlaw liked Raab for his wonderful accuracy of characteristics, Wagner for his movement, vim and vitality.' Currier became a favorite of Professor Raab and received a medal in his class for a drawing, which is reproduced here.

It is unfortunate that almost nothing of Currier's student work has survived, especially his paintings and studies in Wagner's class, which he entered after leaving Raab. It is quite likely that Wagner encouraged him to develop his natural ten-

dency to breadth and freedom. At any rate, after satisfying himself that he had received about all the school could impart, he left the Academy for good, evidently in 1872, and turned to his own resources, the study of the old masters and the inspiration of nature.

CHAPTER III

MUNICH

SOMEbody once referred to the architecture of Munich as a notebook of travel of the Bavarian kings. Much as they have to answer for, however, in well-intentioned architectural atrocities, the Bavarian royalty have always been hospitable to painting and music. From Ludwig the First down to Maximilian II and his son, the famous Ludwig II, Wagner's patron, who ruled from 1864 to his tragic death in 1886, and Luitpold, Prince Regent from 1886 to 1912, all contributed to create an atmosphere of welcome to students and practitioners of art. With such an example, the Munich people naturally were respectful of the arts, and as they were also fond of fetes and gaiety, they were comparatively free from the mercantile spirit. Currier, therefore, came into a remarkably congenial environment, to be his home for nearly thirty years. Situated on the high Bavarian plain with the Alps twenty-five miles to the south, Munich has a variable climate with considerable rain and extremes of temperature in winter and summer. The river Isar, flowing northeasterly to join the Danube, divides the city as the Seine divides Paris, and the Arno, Florence. With its poplar-shaded banks and bridges, together with the English garden and the Park of Nymphenburg, the river gives easy access to sylvan nature in an urban setting. Rising above the city stands the fifteenth-century Frauen-Kirche, a dominant landmark with its twin brick towers, round-capped with green copper.

Not far from Munich, one to the north and one to the west, lie the picturesque villages of Schleissheim and Dachau, the resort of artists for years. In fact, Dachau has been called the Barbizon of Munich. Each of the villages has a fine old castle, and many tree-shaded canals and cottages. The wild swampy moors which stretch away from under the hill of Dachau to the south furnished Currier with many subjects for his landscapes, as did Schleissheim, which, however, does not rise above the surrounding country. Interspersed with the castle gardens, the canals, and many *allées* of poplar, beeches, oaks, and lindens, it also invites the landscape painter.

Soon after Currier left the schools and began to paint by himself, he met Mrs. Sarah Webster, the widowed daughter-in-law of Noah Webster. She was traveling through Munich en route to Dresden to see her sister, Miss Abbie Catherine Appleton, who was studying music there. Mrs. Webster, a painter herself, was greatly impressed by Currier's personality and art, and told her sister Catherine about him. The sisters returned to Munich not long after, and when Currier and Catherine Appleton met, not having seen each other since their accidental meeting in Roxbury, they evidently fell in love at first sight, for they became engaged after an acquaintance of six weeks. Soon after Currier's father and mother heard of the engagement, they decided to come over to be present at their son's wedding, with the expectation that the bride and groom would return to America with them. Accordingly, Currier, his fiancée, and her sister met the senior Curriers in Paris and the marriage took place at the American Legation in November, 1873. Apparently the original intention had been for the young people to establish themselves for a time in Paris, but having some difficulty in finding a suitable apartment and, we

suspect, having a longing for some of his recently formed associations, Currier and his bride returned to Munich, leaving his parents to go back to America alone.

Mrs. Currier, who was, incidentally, the first student of the Boston Conservatory of Music, was a gifted musician; fine-looking, with brown hair and gray-blue eyes, she had a gentle sympathetic disposition and was in every way an admirable companion for Currier. She was three years older than her husband. Miss Currier describes her mother as having 'a happy buoyant nature, bright, demonstrative, childlike and easy of approach.' She and her husband were congenial in their tastes and they led a life of unbroken felicity. Their children tell of their unfailing devotion to each other and the happy atmosphere of their home. Of this marriage there were three children: Bertram, born in Munich, August, 1874; Frank, born November, 1875; and Elizabeth, born February, 1877.

Soon after Currier's return to Munich he began to strike his pace and painted some of his finest canvases. They were mostly portraits and figures, although he also painted some large landscapes, one of which is owned by the Cincinnati Museum and another by the writer. As these pictures are over six feet in their largest dimension and therefore have nearly as much sail-area, so to speak, as some small sailboats, we can imagine the difficulties which Currier encountered in working on them, staying them in a high wind and transporting them back and forth to his studio; for they were all painted on the spot, out-of-doors. During this period from 1873 to 1877, he produced 'The Whistling Boy,' now in the Indianapolis Museum, which is perhaps his best-known figure picture; 'A Munich Boy,' now in Pittsburgh; and probably the 'Peasant Girl,' owned by the writer. The strong influence of the old masters, Velasquez and

Hals especially, appears in the work of these years, but there is also the beginning of a distinct individuality and also a great power.

After painting in and about Munich until 1877, Currier and the group of young Americans which included Duveneck, Chase, and Shirlaw, discovered, as a summer resort, the picturesque little town of Polling, thirty-five miles south of Munich. It is set in a narrow valley in the mountains south of the two lakes of the Ammersee and Starnbergersee. The old Holy Cross Monastery in Polling, secularized in 1803, was then abandoned and the lower parts used as stables for cattle. The artists were prompt to see that the vacant cells could be utilized as studios, and they took possession of the old building for a small rent and, with the peasants as models, together with the cattle and, of course, the fine and varied landscape, they created for themselves an ideal milieu. It was a happy, industrious colony and they were exceedingly stimulating to each other. Currier, with his family, joined them in the spring or summer of 1877.

It is not generally understood that Currier was considered the guiding spirit among the students, so much has been written of Duveneck and Chase. But Duveneck is known to have said definitely that Currier, not he, was looked upon as a leader at this time. His leadership consisted in his association and example, not in the taking of pupils. Some of the men who were later called the 'Duveneck Boys' were of the Polling group, including Twachtman, Alexander, Ross Turner, and probably Dielman, Reinhart, and Bisbing. Currier seems to have stayed more consistently in Polling than the others, in fact he even spent the winters there, perhaps because he had a wife and family to stabilize him.

J.W.A. R.T. & Mills -



Currier
+

Singer
+

Wells -
+

J. W. Alexander
Freem⁺

Currier & his friends
Polling Ben -

CURRIER AND HIS FRIENDS AT POLLING, BY J. W. ALEXANDER

Duveneck had left Munich in 1873 at the time of the cholera epidemic and in 1875 made a success with an exhibition of his portraits in Boston. Where Currier was during the epidemic we do not know, except that he probably was somewhere outside the city. Duveneck returned to Munich in 1878 and took many of his followers with him to Venice, but both he and Chase visited Polling again in 1878, and it is of this year we have the account in Miss Roof's book on Chase, of the gala farewell party which his Polling comrades gave to Chase before he returned to America. He was expected down from Munich to say good-bye to his friends, and was met at Weilheim, the railway terminal a few miles north of Polling, by a shrieking mob who lifted him to an improvised throne set upon an oxcart. The white Bavarian oxen with their quaint yokes were festooned with garlands, a striking caricature of Chase was placed beside him, and on the back of the cart was a keg of beer, from which all hands refreshed themselves as they slowly paraded back to Polling, to the accompaniment of Tyrolese horns, cowbells, and copper kitchenware beaten with spoons. The procession ended at the taproom of the village inn, where the festivities continued until the early hours of the morning.

For Currier these years were fruitful, and it was here that he began to paint landscapes more frequently. In the *Critic* of July 30, 1881, a writer, 'F. W.,' says:

'Currier first went earnestly into water colors in 1878, beginning in early summer with the vaguest impressions of changing effects in sky and land (trying only for "values" without form) and toward autumn doing some strong and original sketches, a number of which were sent to the Water Color Exhibition in New York. Three, I believe, were sold to artists. He made no water colors in '79, but spent all his time on large canvases in

the open air. In the summer of 1880, however, he is said to have made two hundred, including those which appeared at the last exhibition here.'

Fortunately I can quote from one of Currier's letters to his father, written at just this time, which gives its own evidence of the life in Polling:

POLLING, *Sunday, June 29, 1879*

DEAR FATHER:

You will think that we have entirely forgotten you — so long has it been since I wrote you last. The truth is, however, the days are now so long and I am busy early and late. . . . I am out of doors all the time in all kinds of weather. Have already made a large number of sketches — shall have a studio full to carry back with me to Munich. I believe I told you I intended going back in the fall. I feel now I can advance more rapidly there than here. . . . I should like to spend a season some time at the sea. I have often thought I might perhaps find some way of being in Holland a season or two before coming home, it is so very picturesque there. I am in hopes the next things I send home will sell more readily than heretofore. My things last year made quite a reputation for me.

I must close for this time. We all send much love and hope this will find you all as well and happy as we are ourselves.

Your affectionate son,

FRANK

This letter shows Currier's concern about the sale of his pictures. Often as he exhibited both in Munich and America, his work, though it attracted attention, hardly ever sold. It

was too bold and experimental, too different from the fashion of the day, to arouse much more than adverse comment. Currier must have felt this keenly, because he wished to be self-supporting and not dependent upon his father, even though living was cheap in Munich. As the years passed, however, and he continually failed to sell his work, he was forced to rely upon his father's assistance, in fact until his father divided his property between the two sons in 1898.

Nevertheless, as I have said, Currier exhibited at first both at home and abroad, and the catalogues of the Society of American Artists and the American Water Color Society show his name quite regularly from 1878 to about 1883, and infrequently until 1894. In the famous first exhibition of the Society of American Artists in 1878, he showed three canvases, two landscapes and a figure piece called 'A Bohemian Beggar.' He was not, however, elected a member of the Society until 1880. So far as we know, he never exhibited at the National Academy of Design. Where most of these pictures are now remains a mystery, along with the location of much of the rest of Currier's work. His water colors, however, attracted considerable attention, and although most of the comment was unfavorable he sent over a number of his pictures to his friends in America, hoping that they could sell them; but after futile attempts the friends became discouraged, and sent the pictures back or stored them away, half forgotten, in their own studios.

Currier's work evoked a mixture of praise and condemnation in its reception. A good illustration of this is to be found in an article in *Scribner's Monthly* of 1880.¹ I quote:

'... Mr. Currier's pictures are another instance of what can

¹ 'The Younger Painters of America,' by William C. Brownell, *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*, vol. xx, May, 1880, pp. 11-14.

be done in art without poetry — even with the negation of poetry. The water colors he sent here in the winter of 1878–79 made a sensation. They became the subject of endless discussion and may almost be said to have divided “art circles” into two hostile parties. It was contended on the one hand that they were wonderful examples of the way in which an impressionist, nobly careless of details and bent only on the representation of the spirit of nature rather than her botanical forms, can succeed in the truest fidelity. On the other, it was argued that nothing could be made out of them, that they were mere daubs and that the only landscape which could in the faintest way resemble them was that of which one caught glimpses from the window of an express train. “The ayes” had it very clearly, in our view, Mr. Currier’s “impressions” were masterly at a proper distance. The fatal trouble with them was that they were horribly ugly. That is the difficulty with all of Mr. Currier’s work; it is the difficulty with his genius. . . .’

Such left-handed compliments as these may not have troubled Currier as much as we might imagine, although, of course, they did not help the sale of his work. It was, to say the least, discouraging that most of the art critics of his own country did not share in the least the enthusiasm of his fellow painters, who, from the first, proved to be the only intelligent and sympathetic audience he had.

One of the few whole-hearted appreciations of Currier’s work, written during his life, is by Sadakichi Hartmann.¹ Commenting on American art in Europe he says:

‘The most artistic personality of the American colony in

¹ *A History of American Art*, by Sadakichi Hartmann, L. C. Page and Company, 1901, vol. II, pp. 202–05.



PORTRAIT OF CURRIER, BY WILLIAM M. CHASE

Munich is J. F. Currier, as much today as he was twenty years ago. He is a true colourist. His portraits are painted with the dexterity of an old master, and his studies from the outskirts of Munich, or moorland scenes with stormy sunset skies, are observations of the various moods of nature, rendered in a bold and spirited style. All his work is characterised by simplicity of material and breadth of execution. He was a man who seemed destined to become one of the greatest painters of his generation, and who, after all, was satisfied with simple studies in which his artistic temperament could make itself felt merely through colour and clever brushwork. His influence on American contemporary art can hardly be over-rated, as his studio, within the ruined walls of a convent, at Polling, was always thronged with devoted pupils and disciples of his brilliant style.'

Through the years in Munich he exhibited quite regularly at the Kunst Verein, which was a sort of artists' guild where all members paid a small fee for the cost of a series of exhibitions in the Glaspalast. And he was also a member of the Secessionists, which included the German painters, Uhde, Dill, Keller, and others. During the later years in Munich he exhibited once or twice at the Grafton Galleries in London, through the influence of his pupil, Miss Withrow. But he was mostly indifferent or indeed contemptuous of large exhibitions, and cared not at all whether he was accepted or rejected. Writing to Miss Withrow, who had been refused at the Salon of 1887, he says: 'It is useless to make comments. I look at it simply that you have invested in a lottery and drawn a blank. Wait till you see the amount of trash they hang on the Salon walls and you will be of my opinion.'

He also was one of the leaders in the movement to remove the tariff on works of art sent to America, and his name appears as one of the signers of the petition for its removal.

As the letter to his father shows, Currier wished to establish his headquarters in Munich again, probably to keep more in touch with the artistic activities of the time. Accordingly he left Polling in the autumn of 1879 and took an apartment in Munich.

Miss Currier's reminiscences begin at this point and give us a vivid picture of the life of the family. She writes:

'My first remembrances of Munich go back to about 1880, when we lived in Karlstrasse in view of the Glaspalast, and, about two years later when we moved into a private house in Nymphenburg, a suburb of Munich. My earliest impressions of my father were that he was profoundly serious and industrious, and that he demanded absolute obedience from my brothers and me. My Grandfather Currier, from America, visited us during this time, as he was wont to do every few years, hoping to take us all back with him, and I remember him also as very serious, walking up and down the room by the hour with his hands behind his back, saying nothing.

'Our next move was to Schleissheim. Here we lived for two years in a house opposite a lovely canal and there was a large field behind the house where my father painted so many of his sunrises and sunsets in pastel, in later years.

'Among my father's works are many large bold charcoals which I am sure he must have drawn during this time for there are many views of our street with the canal and avenues of oak trees and poplars which abounded there. My father seemed very happy during this period. He was always at his best when

he was living in the country. Very vivid in my memory are little red radishes that he raised in the garden and delighted in bringing up to us for breakfast, his interest in a canary bird and robin belonging to my older brother, Bertram, and his tender care of this same brother after he had passed through a serious operation.'

Carl Marr, who was born in America but who studied and remained in Germany, taught in the Royal Academy, and was ennobled by the Prince Regent, recalls these years in a letter to me from Munich in February, 1935. He writes:

'... I came in touch with Currier first after he had retired to the country where it was connected with some little difficulty to meet him. He had then, as it appeared to me, secluded himself from contact with current life in studios and with students. Only now and then did he exhibit some of his work; mostly landscapes rendered in what I should call "thundering color." His work was so exceptional, it was of such power, ran so far ahead of general artistic apprehension in those days that it was only natural that few should understand and follow him. What a charming fellow he was, what enthusiasm he could display and arouse in others when listeners proved approachable, when he felt that his words found an echo....'

Miss Currier continues:

'It must have been school that took us back to Munich for we children were old enough to start in with the "Volksschule" (public school). We moved into an apartment on Barrerstrasse. He was working very hard, painting oils, exhibiting at the Glaspalast every season and creating quite a sensation in the Munich art world. One day he told us, with a pleased twinkle

in his eye, that the Prince Regent, Luitpold of Bavaria, had met him on the steps of the Glaspalast, stopped him and congratulated him on his fine work. I, very proudly, told one of my school teachers that my father was considered the king of American painters.'

During the years from 1880 to 1890, Currier's family life absorbed so much of his attention, outside his art, that the artists and students saw him less frequently than during the previous decade. Most of his contemporaries like Duveneck and Chase had returned to America by 1880, and the American students in Munich were men from ten to twenty years his junior. Nevertheless, he occasionally joined them in their studios and at the cafés and became intimate with a coterie which included Adams, Forsyth, Fitz, Steele, Meakin, Nowottny, Baer, Ulrich, and McEwen, all of whom strongly felt his example and influence. He made friends with an English painter and musician, Thompson, and was very intimate with a brilliant American *émigré*, Professor Edwin Emerson. Professor Emerson, whose portrait by Lenbach now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum, was twenty years older than Currier. He was a former Presbyterian minister whose principles had clashed with his church and who had been Professor of English Literature and Philosophy at the university at Troy, New York, before going to Munich. He was a picturesque figure with his long white beard, and, during the last years in Munich, Miss Currier says that her father and Professor Emerson used to take walks together almost daily, talking, joking, and philosophizing. Mr. Edward A. Bell was probably Currier's closest associate among the younger Americans, and shared a studio with him in the winters of the middle eighties — very likely one Miss

Nov 10 07
108 Maple St.

My dear Fess:

I have read your card
with the dear old Frenchman
looking up on it. It gives
me the heart ache to look at
it. I was sure that I had
acknowledged the "Monograph
of Leibl. I am very much
obliged to you for it, and
shall get much pleasure from
it. The list came duly to
hand. Let us hear how you
fare in Paris. We are passing
through a severe financial
crisis what the outcome it is.
We are all well. Love
to all.

All are well and send love.
I am distressed and am going to bed.

Sincerely

Frank. Currier.

Currier remembers in Karlstrasse while they lived in Barrerstrasse. Mr. Bell joined Currier in sketching trips from Schleissheim in the summers, and recalls what a helpful critic and inspiring companion he was. In the winter of 1888 Currier had a slight stroke from overwork and Mr. Bell says that he confided to him that it happened in a very curious way. The family were seated at dinner and suddenly Currier found that he could not speak. To reassure his wife and explain to her what had happened, he took a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote in pencil that he could not say a word. Although the stroke apparently did not impair his health permanently, it seemed to intensify his nervousness; he felt that he should be more sparing of his strength and energy, and from that time on painted pictures of less ambitious size and did not work so hard. In fact by 1893 he had ceased painting altogether.

Miss Evelyn A. Withrow of San Francisco was another American student who was strongly influenced by Currier and came as near being a regular pupil as anyone who ever had the benefit of his encouragement and criticism. With her sister Marie, a musician, and her mother, Miss Withrow lived in Munich four years in the early eighties. Although she later traveled elsewhere in Europe and returned to her home in California, she always kept up her friendship with Currier and his family, and his letters to her are one of the chief sources of information about him from 1885 until his death. She was always his loyal disciple and champion, and occasionally was instrumental in selling something for him. At one time she had a large collection of his work, including the famous 'Whistling Boy.'

Miss Currier's reminiscences continue:

'About 1887 most of my father's painting, before and after

his stroke, was done during our summers at Schleissheim where he was most prolific in his work. He did hundreds of pastels, starting off mornings before sunrise, and again late in the afternoon for sunsets, when he would sketch two or three in one evening. Sometimes he used to ask me to come out into the field with a lantern so that he could discern the colors of his pastels. I loved watching him, for he painted with an amazing speed and seemed to be bursting with exuberance over his work. The following morning he would hold the pastels up to the light and be extremely amused at the color effects he got from the lantern light.'

In a letter to Miss Withrow in August, 1887, Currier describes his life in Schleissheim:

'... Thompson is with me this summer and we enthuse to an unlimited extent. He makes an excellent companion. We have chosen as our sunset point the bridge which crosses the canal near the Schloss. The landscape is fine from there and the reflection of the sky in the water simply bewildering. I am working more this year than last — find I can do it without detriment to health though I get *purty* (Frankie's pronunciation) tired at times. I do so long to let out my whole strength without fearing consequences. The Bicyclette plays its part in the program. I ride most every day ten miles or thereabouts. We have a little house — very cosy — all on the ground floor much to Katie's delight. They have ruined the Fischer-Haus (a favorite sketching spot of Currier's near Schleissheim) by cutting down all the big trees but one. It looks like an old hen with all the tail feathers pulled out. I felt it as an insult to a friend when I first saw it. We sketch there nevertheless and find it still of interest.'

Miss Currier writes again:

‘It was during our winters at Barrerstrasse that I first recall my father’s great love of music. Daily he used to practice Bach and play symphonies and chamber music, arranged for four hands, with my mother who was a splendid pianist. My two brothers were studying violin and every evening he made them practice duets together while he directed and corrected their playing. At this time he also bound and repaired volume after volume of music and was perfecting himself in a new method of shorthand.

‘Perhaps due to his extremely nervous and highstrung condition he interested himself in bicycling to have more outdoor life. As with everything he undertook he entered into this with great zest, joined a club and during one season won first prize for long distance riding and even took part in a race. He enjoyed all this like a boy, and when my brothers and I were a little older he bought each one of us a bicycle, including my mother, who enthusiastically entered into all our activities. We took trips “en famille” mostly to Schleissheim where we all felt much at home. We even had a tricycle with two seats with which we had no end of fun and which attracted a great deal of attention and interest in the streets of Munich.

‘In 1890 we moved to Schellingstrasse on the other side of the city, into a new apartment house belonging to a Herr Schneider, a member of the Bicycle Club, and lived there eight years, until we came to America. Our apartment was on the fourth floor and on the fifth were two large studios, one of which my father rented. Connected with it was a small room, ordinarily used for a bedroom, which was stacked with my father’s paintings. I cannot remember ever seeing him paint in this studio, but I do very clearly recall his going over a still-

life in our parlor and, contrary to his usual quick way, being very leisurely and painstaking about it. That same still life is now hanging in my dining room, one of the finest, I think, he ever painted.

‘The studio in Schellingstrasse, however, was not unused, for, although my father was still doing prolific work during summers, painting pastels, he became interested in photography through a friend by the name of Leisser, made his own camera and delighted in experimenting and perfecting himself both in indoor and outdoor photography and doing his own developing and printing. There was a piano in the studio which I used, until my father bought me a grand piano on my eighteenth birthday. During those years there was certainly more music than painting in our home. My father was taking us regularly to the symphony concerts, chamber music concerts and to grand opera. His interest and enthusiasm were a constant inspiration to us and he was most careful and painstaking to form our taste in classic music. Not until we had been thoroughly grounded in Haydn, Mozart, Bach and Beethoven were we initiated in Wagner and more modern music. Even now, after so many years, whenever I hear the classics I am conscious of my father’s presence, and seem to listen and enjoy with his keen appreciation and understanding.

‘In the summer of 1892 my mother felt that her children should see some other place than Schleissheim before coming to America, and, quite independently took matters into her own hands and engaged rooms in Marquartstein, a village in the Bavarian Alps, about five hours’ train ride from Munich.

‘It proved to be a glorious experience for us all. My father, however, seemed to feel no desire or inspiration to paint during all that summer and the following five summers in the moun-

tains, but he became a most enthusiastic climber and scaled the mountains like a chamois. He took pleasure in evading beaten paths and searching for new roads, as straight as possible from the valley to the highest peak, he took his whole family over the newly discovered paths. It was fun but strenuous. My father seemed so light, alive and young that one of the villagers took him to be my older brother.

‘We also devoted many hours during those four summers in Marquartstein to playing tennis, in which my father joined us heartily.

‘In 1897 we spent the summer, our last in Germany, in Garmisch and there my father’s mountain climbing reached its climax for he ascended and descended the highest Bavarian Alp, the Zugspitze, ten thousand feet high, in one day, with my brothers, myself and a German girl friend, trailing sometimes a long distance behind him. This was considered a great feat and we were the talk of the town.

‘He was still bicycling, and we took charming trips to the neighboring villages, including Oberammergau. Certainly Marquartstein and Garmisch were beautiful but not nearly as paintable as Schleissheim for him. No distant horizons for sunrises and sunsets, no soft mellow atmosphere. I heard my father say so often here in New England that the clear cloudless days hurt him, and so it was in the mountains where the air was clear and crisp.’

As the years passed with deceptive swiftness in the pleasant setting of Munich and with their delightful summer outings, it was something of a surprise to Currier and his wife to awaken suddenly to the fact that their children were maturing and that they were confronted with the choice of making them into

either Europeans or Americans. Although all the children had had a fine education in Germany, their parents clearly felt that America was a land of greater opportunity and the logical home for their future. In 1898 the Spanish War stirred up some feeling in Germany against Americans, and in this same year Currier's father decided to divide his property between his two sons, which was another reason for Currier's decision to return to America. Accordingly, in the late summer of 1898, after apparently abandoning or destroying a good part of the contents of his studio, Currier engaged passage from Liverpool to Boston. The family traveled by way of Belgium. Currier in a letter describes crossing the Channel, his immunity to seasickness, and his delight in the effects of moonlight. They spent six weeks in London sight-seeing and preparing to sail. Currier writes of their visit to Saint Paul's on August 13 and expresses his disgust at the lifelessness of the service and the music. He admires the church itself and Watts's picture of 'Time, Death, and Judgment.' The civility of the English impressed him. He visited both the Tate and the National Galleries, where he admired the examples of Watts, Burne-Jones, Constable, and Turner.

On August 27 they sailed from Liverpool on the Leyland Line S.S. *Victorian*, and after a rather rough voyage, which they seem nevertheless to have enjoyed, they landed in Boston early in September, 1898.



PORTRAIT OF CURRIER, BY FRANK DUVERNECK

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN

A SMALL man of five feet, six or seven inches, with wavy dark hair above an intellectual forehead, Currier's gray-blue eyes flashed with an eagle-like intensity from within their slightly inflamed lids. His straight nose was finely cut with a curve in the nostrils. This, repeated in the upper lip, gave him, at times, a faintly disdainful expression. In his later student years he wore the inevitable beard of the time, but for the rest of his life was clean-shaven, except for a dark mustache which contrasted strongly with his pale complexion.

Delicately built, Currier was yet tough and wiry and equal to an infinite amount of tramping, bicycling, and even mountain-climbing. He was so restless that it was irksome for him to sit still for long, and he showed this volatility even in his meditative moments.

Entirely at home among the informalities of artists and musicians, Currier avoided the fashionable. While neat in his person he resented any undue emphasis upon dress and freely disregarded the conventional. In his habits he was regular and temperate. Until the late eighties he smoked in moderation and seldom took more than an occasional glass of beer or wine. Like many artists whose preoccupation with ideas keeps them from attending to the petty affairs of order in the studio, he was amused at his own futile attempts at putting things to rights and says, in a letter to Miss Withrow, in April, 1887:

‘... I have been to the studio once since you left one afternoon and began that gloriously projected clearing up of which we have all heard so much. I believe I succeeded in clearing the window sill, the one facing east. I see in my memory several assorted piles strewn about the floor, begun, only begun. However, that is about as far as any clearing of mine ever did get, so I will try and console myself with a bar or two of Bach.’

On his human side Currier was such a faithful and devoted man of family that many thought him, in his later life, a good deal of a hermit. His wife and children always came first. And although in his student days he was often seen at the cafés talking, playing chess, or listening to music, in his later years in Munich he spent his evenings at home with his wife and children, usually at the piano. His family all testify to his unflagging devotion to them. His children recall their feeling of tremendous admiration, which was not untinged with awe; for while he was gentle and affectionate there was no skylarking or romping between them. He was always captain of the domestic ship. And so, like the happy country that has no history, Currier’s home life gives us few incidents to record because of its perennial felicity.

I must emphasize again his mercurial temperament, for his alternation from exaltation to depression was constant. In his youth it began to trouble him. In his Antwerp diary in January, 1870, he writes, strangely enough: ‘... Do you remember, when a boy, that the thought of destruction was distasteful to you and now fate seems to be pushing out into that very road? Has it not already caused you bitterness enough?’

Abnormally self-analytical, Currier learned at last to expect these periods of low spirits and, except in his later intense

melancholia, he was quite philosophic about them. Even in Antwerp he strove to keep himself in hand, and writes:

‘We deceive ourselves living in such a state of excitement — think we are happy. But how drained of all our vital forces we feel after some excessive use of our faculties for enjoying. The more excitable you are, the more quiet should be your circumstances and vice versa; that is, if you wish to obtain an equilibrium where you can act with reason.’

Currier’s restlessness, however, did not affect the broad plan of his life, for, once having chosen a congenial environment, he was loath to change it. There is no record of his going to Spain or Italy while in Europe, and he was as contented with Munich and its environs as Thoreau, who ‘travelled widely in Concord.’ He found enough variety in the sources immediately at hand. His many hobbies disclose his intense curiosity and interest in so many phases of human thought and activity. But his patience was short in such ordinary matters as letter-writing, and while many of his letters are interesting, they are usually brief, and seldom cover more than four pages of a small folded sheet. Writing to Miss Withrow in March, 1890, he remarks:

‘... I find my pen hurrying over the paper at a breakneck pace to keep up with the idea and that finally wearies one.... Interest wanes when there is no one to talk back. I am convinced that all I want is opposition to keep me going. Now just that is wanting in letter-writing.’

It was this impatience with longhand calligraphy that led him to shorthand, which, for a time, he studied as a hobby, and mastered completely. He even corresponded with the authority Henry Richter, in England, about it, and recommended the use of it to all his friends.

As Miss Currier has shown, besides the study of shorthand, he bound books, went deeply into photography, and later, bicycling and mountain-climbing. In his last years in America his daughter tells of his scorn of those who would teach him to sail a small boat and how, in the shallow bay at South Duxbury, he experimented by himself, capsizing and walking home dripping wet over the flats, quite happy, nevertheless, and at last learning to be a good skipper. He was as adventurous in his recreations as in his painting. But most of his hobbies palled upon him sooner or later, and he gave them up after mastering them sufficiently — all except those which brought him close to nature.

While, as I have noted, there was nothing of the prude or Puritan about Currier, he had the loftiest ideals of ethical conduct and he lived up to them consistently. But his philosophy of life was entirely independent and unorthodox. Although in his youth his family had been church-going, his acquaintance with the works of Emerson and Thoreau liberated him early from any narrow sectarianism. He kept his own course, guided by the best in all the systems of thought that he knew. In everything that I have heard of Currier, and in all his letters that I have read, I have constantly been impressed by his nobility of character. He took the large view of things in general and seldom lost his sense of proportion. Although he was indulgent to those who knew less than he of artistic matters, he was impatient of the average unemotional Anglo-Saxon temperament, and in one of his letters writes with a touch of sarcasm.

‘... Now *material* is what the public want. They do not know that such a thing exists as quality, or rather they know that it does not exist. They have made a profound study of

the matter and have discovered by almost miraculous perception that grass is green, trees another shade of same, sky blue (very blue), clouds white, staring white, and so on. Now their study is done and they are determined not to be awakened out of their convictions.

‘Then their standard is prettiness. I am often amused at Americans especially. You show them a grand picture. They say, “How pretty!” You play them a bit of Beethoven, again “How pretty!” Michael Angelo’s “Moses.” “How prett” — well, no, they don’t get quite so far as that. They are carried out of themselves for once.

‘But we are not all Michaels, and must have minds that can appreciate something less than an earthquake to give us sympathy and sometimes [be] ready to materially assist us. . . .’ And speaking of artistic standards, as opposed to the worldly, he writes: ‘. . . How unfortunate those individuals are who demand of this world anything more than bread and butter, who can’t be satisfied with things tolerably well done. . . .’ In another letter he suggests himself, humorously, as an ideal agent for a wealthy collector and says, ‘In almost no time will I get him a collection which will be utterly beyond his comprehension.’

In the latter years Currier exhibited less and less, undoubtedly because he had come to see the futility, for him at least, of trying to make a living by his art. I cannot imagine a painter less qualified to succeed commercially than Currier, for he frequently changed his subject, his method of approach, and his medium, made no concessions to popular taste, and was far too modest and too serious to advertise himself in any way. Some who knew him have speculated about what would have happened had he not been endowed with an independent in-

come, and have thought that he might have produced more and become better known, both in Europe and America, had he been forced to sell his pictures. I think, however, had he been so situated, he would, if anything, have produced less and probably relied upon teaching as a source of income. For it would have been as impossible for him to popularize his art as to be untrue to himself in any other way. He never could have watered his wine, and I, for one, think that this was most fortunate for him and for the world of art; for without material handicaps his genius had a chance to flower in full. He made, at first, many earnest attempts to sell his work, but, in his middle life must have concluded that it was useless. So, with the sanction of his father, he decided to devote himself to his painting unreservedly and let the world go by. And here it should be said that Currier's father deserves great credit for his unfailing assistance, which was all the more broadminded as he had not the slightest understanding of his son's art and saw nothing in it. Currier did, however, sell an occasional oil or water color, usually to artists, but was generally surprised or humorous about it. Writing to Miss Withrow, who had interested a lady in one of his water colors, he says: 'I am certain I shall not be able to let her have anything at so low a figure again. You see I am like the Bourse, I fluctuate. One day I am ready to sell out for fifty cents. The next day I am not to be had for any price.' If he felt impelled, he often gave a picture to an appreciative friend, and in moving from one studio to another he sometimes abandoned his canvases in carelessness or indifference which undoubtedly accounts for the disappearance of some of his work.

Such indifference to the main chance demonstrates decidedly that he was no Yankee trader or super-salesman. Like Corot,

had he been apprenticed to a draper he surely would have sold the best of the cloth first and exasperated his employer. So I think we should remember that, contrary to popular superstition, artists do not always thrive upon adversity. Some have succeeded in spite of it, but the list is long of those financially independent who have produced great art. Corot, Constable, Delacroix, and, in our own day, Sargent, Eakins, and even the modern Cézanne, were all men who were either endowed with a modest fortune or were assisted by their families. The story of Corot selling his first picture at the age of fifty is familiar, and his words of disappointment that 'his collection was broken' remind us of Currier, who had a remarkably complete one of his own. Thus, with his residence in Europe for nearly a generation, it is not surprising that his own country lost sight of him and that even today he is but a vague tradition here. A year or two ago someone tried to interest one of our leading museums in Currier, only to discover that it had never heard of him!

Currier loved music as a constant source of joy and relaxation. He knew the best of it profoundly, including some understanding of harmony and counterpoint, and the intricate structure of the classics. Mr. Bell tells of sharing a studio with him in Munich and how, after painting intensely upon a study, Currier would jump up, go to a piano, and in a frenzy of impulsiveness render a rippling flood of difficult passages in Bach or Beethoven. He always played from a score and seldom or never improvised. As a remedy for fatigue he turned again and again to playing Bach. Many times in his letters he speaks of consoling himself with his music, and writes upon one occasion: '... I stick to Bach. That's the best music for me at present.

I can understand now Schumann calling it "daily bread." Bach is health and vigor itself'; and again: 'He is a blessing to me at the present crisis. He is so quiet and elevating.' Miss Currier has shown his concern about his children's progress in music and his desire that they should become firmly grounded in the classics before they formed a liking for more modern music. This emphasis upon the importance of acquiring a fine taste seems almost Utopian in these days, when children hear everything, good and bad, from the time of infancy.

Currier was quite as discriminating in his taste in painting. He admired the old masters with the same reverence that all good artists accord them. But he naturally had a preference for those men whose work coincided with the spirit of his own, and was therefore especially fond of Rubens, Velasquez, Hals, Jordaens, and Ribera, and in landscape, Constable and Turner.

The early Italians and primitives seem to have influenced him but little. Likewise, not until after he had stopped painting did he discover the beauties of Chinese and Japanese art, probably because the appreciation of it which began in Paris in the late sixties reached Munich very late. Currier often expresses his admiration of Michelangelo's 'Moses' and the Sistine ceiling, although there is no evidence of his having seen them in the original. He was also devoted to the Barbizon school, especially to Corot, Rousseau, Millet, and Dupré. We can well understand why he felt a special kinship with Dupré's heavy impasto, so much like his own. Writing to Miss Withrow in September, 1888, he says: '... Saw a picture by Dupré (landscape) the other day in a private collection, — utterly useless to try to describe it to you. It simply crushed me with its overwhelming power. And to think that I never

can see it again; this world is a cruel place, say what you will . . .'

In the work of his contemporaries he had a few favorites, but was always indifferent to current exhibitions. He liked the early work of Chase, Duveneck, and Sargent, and speaks in a letter of his pleasure that Whistler was expected to send a group of his pictures to Munich. Except for Leibl, Lenbach, and a few others, he cared very little for nineteenth-century German painting. In the summer of 1890 he writes to Miss Withrow:

' . . . The yearly exhibition is now in full swing and there are some things I wish you could see. A Leibl painted in his old manner only still finer in color if you can imagine that possible. Then the Dutch have sent some beautiful work, wonderfully true to nature. The Germans, as usually, trying hard to do something but not quite succeeding. It's all too theatrical. Leibl is the best man. I am glad to see that they have bought his picture for the Pinakothek. Harrison has some fine things. Very interesting in color.'

Painters are often a little narrow and quite apt to be limited to their own particular field, but Currier, even at the age of twenty-seven, in Antwerp, was already a man of considerable general culture, and had read much of the best literature. He was well acquainted with Shakespeare, Emerson, Thoreau, Ruskin, and Whitman. He was always a reader of good books, although at times he read little or nothing. And he did not scorn to relax now and then with a dime novel or a detective story. He was fond of Dickens and Charles Reade, and he liked good poetry. He read considerably in French, and in his later life in America writes: ' . . . I have just finished two of Zola's works, *Fécondité* and *Travail*. I found them very vital.

Of course, they are not polite reading but I must confess the older I grow the less I like polite literature. I feel that at least Zola is telling pretty near the truth.' In the same letter he also speaks of liking O. Henry's short stories, and in another, Kipling.

One of Currier's most outstanding traits was his exceptional critical sense. Although, unlike Duveneck and Chase, he had no regular classes, many younger men who knew him spoke of his most helpful criticism, which instantly cleared up their momentary confusion or indecision and encouraged them to higher efforts. He had a remarkable insight into the complex processes of art and the best methods of study, and gave advice which had both general and particular application. If a student could not find a ready subject in nature, Currier would point out to him an intimate bit like a single tree or a sand bank and, with his enthusiasm, kindle his interest in what at first had seemed merely trivial or commonplace. And he always tried to show the relation of art to life, revealing that great art is but another aspect of man's commentary upon the mystery in which he finds himself and in which there is neither advance nor retrogression, but only infinite variety.

In his Antwerp days he wrote in his diary at random:

'Notice the action of all things upon each other. Therein lies the cause of their present existence and the foretelling of their future. Earthquakes and water are the earth's sculptors. Wind, the waves and sky — the sky is the wind — its *expression*. Rocks are the bones — earth is flesh. . . .'

'To bring all to the same level would not reform the world, not make it happier. To bring each one to his own level would



STUDY OF TREES. GROSS-HESELOHE, 1872

be, I think, true reformation. Farmer John would be miserable in my place and I in his. . . .’

‘Make ready, fire, bang, . . . aim, seems to be the principle upon which many people shoot — myself among the number.’

‘Time is but relation. Crowd it with events, doubts and fears and a few moments become what under different conditions it requires a long lapse of time to accomplish.’

Writing to Miss Withrow in 1886, he says:

‘. . . Now that you are at work I will hint that you should not make all your sketches with one object in view. Work in a variety of ways with a variety of ends in view. Make some detached studies leaving color quite out of the question, take a pencil or better still, a pen, for bits of architecture and delicate details in whatever object, and draw them clearly and firmly. Much better to keep your color studies broad and study for analysis with keener tools.’

In a letter to a student who had been suffering from ill health, he gives the following advice: ‘You must take the best of care of yourself. *Live regular hours*. Don’t have dinner one day of beefsteak at twelve and the next, puff balls at three — *that’s what I mean*.’

In an appreciation privately printed a year after Currier’s death, Miss Withrow wrote: ‘. . . His was the mission of “illumination.” If given a brain that was accustomed to think he could lead it through the intricacies of a Beethoven symphony . . .’ Quoting his words, she gives some of his propositions:

‘The principle of receding surface is the same in a half an inch or half a hundred miles. Nature has worked only on two

lines — straight and curved. Why complicate matters? Why call a series of lines by a strange name? It is only the same line many times repeated — know that, for what it was intended, a carrot is preferable to a diamond and vice versa — therefore, all things are equal and all beautiful — Think! Simply in your mind, then make your stroke. Load with paint if it means something but not if it doesn't — 'tis not the paint that counts. Paint with your foot if you want to. It is not the method, not the way it is done or what it is done with, but the result.'

And again she writes:

'... That was his method of criticism — fearless, broad-minded, unique, healthy, encouragingly severe; never sarcastic, never ordinary or commonplace and never any touch of ridicule.... He most keenly felt what few teachers ever think of — a responsibility for the results of his instruction.'

His friend and comrade of the Munich days, Ross Turner, in a memorial notice in the *Boston Evening Transcript* after Currier's death, said of him:

'... He was an excellent teacher always, never making himself conspicuous by small eccentricities of manner, never posing, never asserting himself. His wants were simple, his manner of living almost austere. He lived the life of a true artist. He did not esteem highly those who worked art as a social or pecuniary lever to obtain position to which neither talent nor industry entitled them.

'As a friend to the real student, many of the "boys" in those old Munich days will recall, no effort was too great for Mr. Currier. He freely gave his aid by criticism, advice, and even by financial assistance. It seemed natural for him to do these things, without any expectation of a feeling of obligation on the part of those who were the recipients of his bounty. He was

modest and not given to loud talk. By many it was said, very truthfully, that his advice and aid did more for some students than a semester in the academy. One of the most eminent artists in Munich group said: "Whenever I feel as if the way was closed, and inspiration and courage dead, I go over to see Currier, and always return refreshed, invigorated, and ready for work." Nor was he alone in this appreciation of Mr. Currier, for many who met him and received from him encouragement and counsel will testify to the truth of all that has been said here, and will look deep in the innermost sanctuary of their memories to recall his simple helpful talk on art matters; for he gave us the real truth, truth older than any of the academies or art institutions could give, handed down from generations of workers to workers, more precious than whole libraries of art books and theories, no matter how grandly they may set forth the subject or how elaborately the details may be carried out.'

Although the direct tradition be broken and those who knew Currier pass away, his principles are inherent in his work and not only reveal his high character, but offer inspiration and instruction to coming generations. When I think of his personality, influence, and example, I am reminded of the words of Henry Adams in his famous *Education*:

'A parent gives life, and as parent gives no more. A murderer takes life and his act stops there. A teacher affects eternity, he can never tell where his influence stops.'

CHAPTER V

AMERICA

ANYONE who has lived long enough in Europe to feel at home there is qualified to understand something of the abrupt and painful transition it must have been for Currier at fifty-five, and after thirty years abroad, to return to America. Strongly as he felt the necessity, it was for him like uprooting a flourishing tree and transplanting it to an arid soil. Such experiments may succeed in youth, but age does not easily sustain radical changes of environment. The Boston of 1898 was a vastly different place from the comparatively unsophisticated city of the sixties which he had left as a young man. By this time there was much of art and music and many of our best American painters were working and exhibiting there. It seems, perhaps, strange that Currier should have felt so little at home in the midst of it. But he was too firmly entrenched in his European tastes and habits, as well as his domesticity, to mix with the newer forces developing around him, which might indeed have inspired and sustained him had he been able to adjust himself to them.

Try to imagine what might have happened to Whistler or Henry James had they returned to live in the United States at the end of their lives. Edith Wharton in her book of reminiscences, *A Backward Glance*, describes an incident which, in a humorous way, illustrates the feeling of expatriated Americans returning to their native land after the richness of the European



CURRIER. ABOUT 1895

atmosphere. She and her husband were entertaining Henry James at their home in Lenox, Massachusetts, and took him for an automobile ride among the hills near-by. He had often jested about what he called 'the thin, empty, lonely American beauty.' Mrs. Wharton writes:

'When his eye caught the fine peak rising alone in the vale between Deerfield and Springfield, with a wooden barrack of a "summer hotel" on its highest ledge, I told him that the hill was Mount Tom and the building the famous Carthusian monastery. "Yes, where the monks make Moxie," he flashed back, referring to a temperance drink that was blighting the landscape that summer from a thousand hoardings.'

I am sure that Currier would have shared James's sentiments, although he was far less cosmopolitan than the novelist. What Currier missed was that sympathy with painting and music which prevailed in Munich and to which he had become so accustomed. For he was, strangely enough, almost as much a provincial in Munich as if he had never left Boston at all, but in a vastly different sense of the word. To be deprived of a congenial atmosphere at his age was to be suffocated. He found himself an alien in his own country. He was as far away from the sources of his inspiration as Herman Melville in his later years, and almost as lonely. It was the tragedy of the return of the expatriate.

A letter to Miss Withrow written on board the S.S. *Victorian* a day or two before Currier landed in America early in September, 1898, shows a happy anticipation of home-coming and his hope that his children will develop and prosper in their music in Boston. Miss Currier says that her father tried hard at first to convince himself that he was happy. But after not quite two years he evidently gave up the struggle, for he writes

again, in June, 1900, to Miss Withrow: 'I have tried to acclimate myself and made a poor job of it.' He complains bitterly of the distraction of the street noises near his house and then writes in the same letter: 'Honestly, I have in these past two years suffered so much wretchedness of spirit that could I have got a foothold in space somewhere I would have given this ball of dirt on which we rotate such a kick that it would have had a fit of aberration to astonish the astronomers!' Two years later he writes:

'I might as well tell you now, as later, that Boston is for *me* a miniature Inferno. That is, you understand, simply individual. There is very much here to admire, also not to admire. There is too much of mere surface quality and far too little seriousness. *Dress* is paramount. That goes before all else. In art, music, etc., the feminine element is altogether out of proportion to the masculine. Men have no time for such things, being occupied with grubbing for money to keep up the establishment.'

In the first years at home his children also suffered from nostalgia, but they soon made the transition and became adjusted, while their father slowly but inevitably sank into more frequent spells of brooding melancholy.

Soon after their return to America Currier and his family settled in Boston near his parental home in Roxbury, but after several years, craving a quieter abode, he bought a house at 108 Maple Street, Roxbury, opposite Franklin Park, which was the family's city home until his death. But in the summer, at a little cottage in South Duxbury, Currier was happiest during his last years. Miss Currier, writing of him at this time, says:

'In America my father only seemed himself at our summer

cottage in South Duxbury, where he entered as enthusiastically into sailing as he did into mountain-climbing in Germany. He also planted a large vegetable garden and tended and watched over it as carefully as he did over his little red radishes, nearly twenty years before in Schleissheim. He rose before sunrise nearly every day and went out sailing, always clad in short bloomers, his legs and feet bare, and during the day invited as many of our neighbors as the sailboat could hold to go out with him — and the rougher the better.

‘But his painting days were over, and the only time when his interest seemed to be revived was when he had a great many of his pastels framed with hand-carved frames, made by Charles Prendergast for an exhibit at the St. Botolph Club. He used to come home with one or two of the pastels tucked under his arm, place them on a chair and ask his family to come and tell him how they liked them.

‘He was still keenly interested in our musical careers, had great ambitions for my brother and me, and always remained the family man he was in Germany. He seemed supremely contented when the whole family was gathered together in the evening in the living room, either reading or studying. We never were surprised that he was not painting. It simply did not seem part of him, here in America. But I never knew my father to be idle. He was always digging and striving and perfecting whatever he undertook.’

He did at length revive his friendship with some of the students of his youth in Boston, and became acquainted with other artists at the Boston Art Club, some of whom he had known in Munich. In fact, in 1904 and 1905 he even held several exhibitions of his last Munich pastels in Boston, New York,

Minneapolis, and Cincinnati, where they aroused a momentary interest. In 1907 his 'Whistling Boy' was sold to the Indianapolis Museum, and just after his death the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh bought the canvas 'A Munich Boy.' But even so, he showed little interest in his own work and made few efforts to display or sell it.

All of his associates at the Boston Art Club recall what a stimulating talker he was on all subjects, even at a time when he was not painting and when he was in low spirits. He continued to help his children and their student friends with criticism and encouragement and was proud of their advancement in music. He also was interested in the work of younger painters whom he happened to meet. He kept up his correspondence with Miss Withrow, although, as ever, he was an infrequent letter-writer. His closest associates were his old friends the artists Horace Burdick, Ross Turner, and Frank Tompkins. He never met Duveneck or Chase again after his return to America.

Occasionally a painter would come to Boston who would show an interest in Currier's work and, for a time, revive his enthusiasm, but his lapses into melancholy were more and more frequent. In 1903 his father died, which gave him much responsibility in the management of the family affairs. He cultivated a few hobbies, and bought at auction, from time to time, some beautiful Oriental rugs, which he used to bring home and lay over a chair to enjoy their rich colors. And he also made a collection of Japanese prints. But he paid but slight attention to the art in current exhibitions, although, with his friends, he occasionally went the rounds of the galleries, and when Sorolla and Zuloaga exhibited in Boston he was genuinely enthusiastic about them. Of all works of art that he

found in America, he loved best the exquisite Greek marble head of Aphrodite in the Museum of Fine Arts, of which he always kept a framed photograph in his house.

Around 1906, during the craze which led to the panic of 1907, Currier became interested in stock speculation and very unfortunately entrusted the reinvestment of some of his inherited capital to a broker whom he met at the Art Club. There is no accounting for this lapse of judgment, for up to this time he had been sufficiently shrewd in his financial affairs, lived within his income, and was contented to let well enough alone. Evidently he felt that he was going to increase his fortune and make his children's future doubly secure. When the crash came in 1907, the part of his fortune invested in speculative stocks dwindled to nothing, and this blow, added to his former unhappiness, was too much for him. Although the family still had means with what was left, the injury to his pride and self-confidence made him exaggerate his loss, and he brooded over it until he was convinced that he had ruined his family. It was in vain that his devoted wife and children tried to cheer him and dispel the ever-deepening shadow, which was like a tragic fulfillment of his youthful moods of depression. In the winter of 1908 his melancholia increased so much that he went to a sanitarium at Waverley. He seemed better at intervals, but there was no permanent improvement.

On Saturday afternoon, January 15, 1909, after returning from a day's trip to Waltham with his brother and his nurse, Currier and the nurse got off the train at Waverley, leaving his brother to continue on to Boston. After waving good-bye to his brother from the station platform, Currier threw himself under the wheels of the moving train and was killed almost instantly.

Currier's grave is in Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston. His wife, who survived him by twenty years, died in 1929. His older son, Bertram, died in 1934. His daughter Elizabeth and his younger son, Frank, are now living near Boston, and there are seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.



CANAL AT SCHLEISSHEIM

CHAPTER VI

CURRIER'S ART

EVERY generation,' said Thoreau, 'abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.' We are reminded of this when we observe the fluctuations of taste in the art centers of the world. Although at last the good is winnowed and remains, it is almost certain to suffer a period of purgatory. We recall the tragic neglect of Rembrandt in his last years, and the fact that Vermeer was forgotten for over two centuries. Fashions run their course, and every age has what someone has called its 'climate of opinion.' To understand something of these deceptive mutations is important, because the aims and qualities of Currier's art are quite as much out of fashion today as they were in his own generation.

Radical movements in art have their uses. The wise artist does not disdain them, as he also is willing to serve an apprenticeship in a tradition, and yet the true measure of a student's ultimate success is in almost direct ratio to his ability to keep his head in the fads of the moment, in the clash of conflicting doctrines. If he has anything to say he soon gives us his own message and steers his own course. And that is why we honor the stability of those men who were not unduly influenced by Monet during the *plein air* furor, however much they may have profited by his high key and technical experiments, and why the best artists of our own time have not been thrown off their balance and turned themselves into little Cézannes, Matisses, and Picassos.

In considering Currier's painting, therefore, I should like to emphasize not so much his affiliation with the Munich tradition as his independence of it. We have seen that he served a very satisfactory apprenticeship in the schools. But where he begins to strike a distinct note of his own is what concerns us here, and also to trace the sources of his inspiration. Surely the fine examples of Hals, Rubens, and Velasquez in Antwerp as well as in Munich must have kindled the spark of his superb dash and vigor of style. And I am certain that he could have found no finer contemporary example than Wilhelm Leibl to confirm him in his choice of artistic touchstones. For through all these men he was constantly turned back to Nature itself, which, one need never tire of repeating, is the fountainhead of all inspiration.

Currier had much in common with Duveneck and Chase, so much that it is sometimes difficult to tell the early work of one from the other. Currier and Duveneck shared almost equally a certain excess of vitality, while Chase, an unquestioned virtuoso of the brush, brilliant and versatile indeed, seems a shade superficial in comparison with the rugged, wholesome, I might almost say homely qualities of the other two. In temperament Duveneck was calmer and more phlegmatic, Currier more mercurial and impetuous, and the mature work of both men reflects this distinction. All pictures which are unmistakably by Currier are quite as unmistakably born of a passionate *furia* which possessed the artist at the moment and sustained his effort, until, as sometimes happened, the impulse or the interest waned. Consequently, while there are naturally pictures of his that do not rise to his highest levels, as with all artists, there is almost nothing either pedestrian or merely commonplace. A key to this is the fact that, however damaging to his reputation

for diligence, he apparently never painted unless he felt like it. It is equally evident that he felt like painting very often, but when he didn't he simply ceased to paint at all. And thus in actual volume he produced less than many of his more industrious and better-known contemporaries.

One charge that is almost sure to be brought against Currier is his remaining for so long an expatriate. In fact as early as 1889 I find that excellent critic, Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, comparing him in this way, to his disadvantage, with Winslow Homer, even though she admits his many rare qualities.¹ Writing of Homer's water colors she says:

' . . . Those who remember them will remember also how they divided the honors of the exhibition with certain water colors sent from Munich by Frank Currier — these likewise being color studies of stormy sunset skies though over moorland instead of water. In comparing them one saw the difference between a natural colorist like Currier and a vigorous artist like Homer who, although he could make himself felt through color, did not handle it as though born to this sole end. Currier's drawings, in spite of their great breadth and hurrying dash of method, were far more suave in tone, more subtle in suggestion, more harmonious, more beautiful; and they were also more skillful and refined in execution. But they were no more artistic in conception than Homer's, no stronger, no more valuable as fresh, frank records of personal sensations felt in the face of nature; and they lacked the native American accent which Homer had put into even his waves and boats.'

This absence of the American note might seem at first thought a defect, did we not consider that for a portraitist and

¹ Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, *Six Portraits*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1889, pp. 247-48.

painter of single figures nationality is hardly more than an affair of nomenclature. Surely we do not think Sargent particularly un-American for living abroad, and painting duchesses occasionally, like Copley or Stuart, who resided so long in England. And I think it matters very little to anyone *where* Whistler painted his 'Mother,' his 'Carlyle,' or his 'Miss Alexander.' It is the landscape and genre painter who draws inspiration from his native soil, and it is in this that there is some justice for criticizing the expatriate. But it is easy to carry these speculations too far, forgetting that even Millet's peasants or Corot's landscapes, for example, are not so much purely *French* as types which transcend locality and rely upon a universal Nature. Thus Whistler loved the gray mists of the Thames, and Currier the rain-clouds that rolled up over the moorland plateau of Schleissheim and Dachau. These might indeed have been almost anywhere, but, as it happened, they were also in a setting congenial to the temperament of both men, who were more at home in an urbane civilization than in the comparatively provincial society of America in the seventies and eighties. Much as the *émigré* has been derided by those who make a fetish of the American scene, I think the disparagement unwarranted. As a rule all artists sooner or later find their true environment, and if they flourish in it and produce great art there is little more to be said. And if a man has planted himself and thriven in a congenial *milieu*, it is clearly a mistake to pull him up by the roots late in life. Undoubtedly, therefore, Whistler and Henry James, for example, were wiser than Currier. But we must remember that they gave few hostages to Fortune and did not have to decide upon the future of their families.

No one who has not seen Currier's work at full length can

imagine its variety. He was equally at home with the figure, still-life, and landscape, in all mediums. The simplest motives were enough for him. He did not go far to find a subject. Perhaps the gravest fault that one can find with him is that apparently he never was able to compose away from Nature or from memory, which might indicate a weakness of imagination did we not know how much he arranged and composed in the presence of Nature. He seldom deals with more than one figure upon his canvas. We are left in doubt about what he would have done with more ambitious themes, although he had so just a sense of design that it seems certain he would have succeeded. Probably in his student years he was compelled to make the usual number of compositions, although none of them have as yet been discovered or perhaps remain. His landscapes and still-lives show that he could manage complex motives successfully, and I have yet to see a painting by Currier that was not well arranged. His finest pictures, however, suggest inspired improvisations, but, unlike musical improvisations, they are preserved in a permanent medium. At all events, Currier was never a formalist or designer of coldly classical patterns, and if he lacks something of the sublime soaring of a Turner or a Delacroix, he compensates by his distinguished success with the subjects immediately at hand which he interprets with such unrivaled gusto. Like Hals and Velasquez or his German contemporary Leibl, he eschews the literary or anecdotal, preferring the visual harmonies of form and color directly related to reality which suggest their own sentiment and do not borrow from an alien art.

It is quite certain that the influence of the French Impressionists reached Munich in Currier's time. In one sense he was undoubtedly an Impressionist, if by this we mean a painter who

boldly grasps and expresses a transitory and fleeting effect. In this he was among the very first of American artists and was often considered a dangerous radical. He suggests at times the spirited style of Manet, his frankness, and, too, his usually quiet key. But if we mean the Impressionism of Renoir, Monet, Sisley, and Pissarro and their competition with sunlight, we must omit Currier. I think he deliberately kept to a low or medium key from choice and not from habit or indifference, even when he had emerged from the darker and more bituminous studies characteristic of the Munich School in the seventies. These have often been criticized, and justly, as an affectation in copying the tones that time has wrought upon some of the old masters. In spite of all this, Mr. Bell tells me that he has seen pictures by Currier painted in a very high key indeed, proving that he was not incapable of it. I have in my possession pastels of Currier's that are as light in tone as some of the work of Twachtman, in his later period, who is often cited as a true disciple of Monet.

But does it really matter after all in what key a painter or a composer plays his symphonies? To exhaust the keyboard, to the extent of pure black or pure white, is not strength but weakness. Our landscape painter Tryon, who, like Currier, was pre-eminently a tonalist, used to emphasize the fact that true power, as well as the finest color, lay in the middle range. Regardless of key, Currier's pictures are luminous, atmospheric in the same sense of envelopment, and full of color. And for that matter his comrades, Duveneck, Chase, and Twachtman, also varied their key and scale as often as subject and mood dictated. Whatever one's attitude toward the Modernistic credo, it has at least dispelled some of the fog in which this subject has been obscured. El Greco's inky blackness is ac-

cepted with cheerfulness, Ryder's lovely but murky moonlights go unchallenged, and even the prevalence of a good deal of snuffy brown in the pictures of that excellent painter Thomas Eakins does not seem to interfere seriously with his acceptance by the disciples of the new faith.

As long ago as 1844 Edward FitzGerald, writing to Frederic Tennyson, commented on the famous argument between Sir George Beaumont and Constable, and said perhaps the last word on this perennially controversial subject:

'... When Sir George was crying up the tone of the old masters' landscapes and quoting an old violin as the proper tone of color for a picture, Constable got up, took an old Cremona, and laid it down on the sunshiny grass.... I agree with Sir George and Constable both. I like pictures that are not like nature. I can have nature better than any picture by looking out of my window. Yet I respect the man who tries to paint up to the freshness of earth and sky. Constable did not wholly achieve what he tried at, and perhaps the old masters chose a soberer scale as more within the compass of lead paint. To paint dew with lead!'

Currier was a painter's painter *par excellence*. His old friend Horace Burdick tells me that Currier used to say, 'When I have my canvas covered I like to wallow around in paint.' This zest for the unctuous plastic qualities of the medium he shared, of course, with his Munich contemporaries, as well as with a few others elsewhere, especially the gifted Italian Mancini, who had much in common with Currier. Mr. Cortissoz, commenting on Duveneck,¹ quotes Sargent's remark, 'After all's said, Frank Duveneck is the greatest talent of the brush of this generation,' and then writes:

¹ 'The Field of Art,' *Scribner's Magazine*, February, 1927.

‘Precisely. Of the brush. He was a prodigious virtuoso and what he inculcated in his disciples was nothing less than a consuming passion for the sheer manipulation of paint. . . . Paint was used with a lavish hand in his *cénacle*. It was used as the old Dutchmen used it, in thick impasto. Only the important thing was to use it lovingly, understandingly, so that you gave the genius of pigment its chance and left a painted surface sensuously beautiful.’

This well applies to Currier, whose canvases are indubitably ‘sensuously beautiful.’ Like other artists, however, who have abandoned themselves at times to sheer bravura, in many of Currier’s works of his early and middle period the brush strokes, as well as the pigment, are entirely subordinate, and the medium itself is as unobtrusive as in the work of the Renaissance masters.

Mr. Cortissoz also says in this connection, as his own reservation about Duveneck’s painting, that his heart sank when he saw, at the San Francisco Exposition in 1915, one historical fact that ‘Duveneck’s tradition in the old Munich days had wallowed in bitumen and with the passage of the years the sins of that treasonous medium had come home to roost, covering many a beautiful canvas with a network of cracks. . . . His transposition of the brown sauce of Rembrandt would have triumphed utterly if it had not been for that single lapse.’

Some of Currier’s canvases have also suffered slightly in this way, though in none that I have seen is the effect of this medium very disastrous. The Germans were not alone in using it, for its ravages may be seen in many a French and English picture of the day, but as far as I have seen Currier did not employ it extensively. He was, however, a reckless experimenter, and apparently never felt the slightest restriction in what is



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supposed to be 'legitimate' in the use of any medium. He broke all conventional rules only to triumph by achieving new effects usually combined with that elusive and indefinable essence which we call quality.

In the technique of oil, he experimented exhaustively. I have seen still-lives of Currier's with as many different textures as a Chardin or a Villon — little miracles of technique. He was very fond of painting oysters, where the pearly white and the purplish black of the shells contrast with the ochreish gray of the slippery mollusks themselves. In fact, Currier's painting of white is one of the great charms of his work. It is a white shot through with the suggestion of all colors and yet remains pure in tone and value. It has often been said that the painting of white is the test of a colorist, and Currier's work confirms it.

Some of his landscapes in oil fairly sweep one off one's feet with their sentiment of breezy freshness, which is expressed in unbelievable scrapings and loadings of pigment and dashing strokes of the brush. And his choice of subjects never depends for its interest on the obviously picturesque. It is the justness of the big relations of tone, of sky to earth and to the upright plane of trees, that is observed to the subtlest nuance, and it is in these transitions, playing over a fine design, that the charm of his landscapes consists. They express a fleeting moment of dawn, evening, or passing cloud shadows, never the static or easily imitated effect. From the first he had a particular fondness for the sky, which he studied in all its phases, and he loved a low horizon, broken only by a tree or two or the roofs of clustered cottages.

The faces in many of his portraits are marvelous mosaics of separate touches, knit and melted together by their close values. The color shades from cream to warm ochres and pearly

white, to cool half-tones with an almost imperceptible suavity. The shadows, too, are usually full of color — another infallible mark of the colorist. And instead of obtrusive or impertinent accessories the backgrounds are subdued planes of quiet hues — tones that come of scraping, loading, or other means of manipulation, but playing their part in the final harmony.

Such painting is as hazardous as juggling or tight-rope walking, where absolute success or utter failure impends on either hand. Abbott Thayer, whose work has a certain kinship with Currier's, used to call it 'intelligence on tiptoe.' It is an artistic gamble which may win a masterpiece or lose it by a single stroke. But it demands more nervous effort in a day than a month of plodding imitation.

Currier's water colors, as we have seen, probably brought him more renown in America during his life than his work in any other medium, even though it was largely a *succès de scandale*. As Mrs. Van Rensselaer records, upon one occasion Winslow Homer and Currier each sent water colors to the annual exhibition of the New York Water Color Society. The hanging committee were distressed, for when they tried to hang the work of any other artist near to either of these the power of the Homers and Curriers put everything else in the shade, and they finally were compelled to hang all the Curriers in one group, the Homers in another, and then proceed to arrange the rest of the exhibition. We can well believe this from the few water colors by Currier which have come to light from attics and portfolios. For, excepting Winslow Homer, there is no one who then handled water color more broadly and yet with such a just observation of the big values and tone relations. The conventional water color of the seventies and eighties was often a timid, niggled affair. The Homers and the

Curriers had an epic sweep and a master's certainty of touch.

Currier often scraped his water colors with a palette knife or loaded them up with body color, only to wash them partly off and paint into them again. Miss Withrow wrote on the subject:

' . . . I was looked upon as heretical because, for one thing, I advocated the use of "body color" when working in water color. . . . I placed the question before Mr. Currier. "Body color," he said, "why not use it? Can you interpret an opaque surface with a transparent medium? Tell them to do it if they can . . . but they cannot!"'

He was equally at home in pastel, and handled it as broadly or as minutely as his mood invited. In this exquisite medium, so peculiarly adapted to the purposes of a tonalist, he produced work that suggests the range and mastery of Whistler or the landscapist Tryon. It was the last cycle of his artistic activity. As in his water colors, he gives us mainly impressions of early morning or late evening. His daughter has told of his sketching these moments on the spot where he secured the freshness of first-hand observation. His pastels were confined to landscape, but quite regardless of what they represent, their rich color often strongly suggests the spinach greens of Chinese jade or the burning flashes of dark opals.

Another extremely interesting side of Currier's art is his extensive use of charcoal, in which he worked a great deal, mostly from landscape. He has left many of these vigorous studies, some of which seem almost titanic in their force and freedom. He had a distinct flair for the medium, quite as much as Hunt or Millet, and often had photographs taken of his most successful charcoals, which he gave freely to his friends. He returned again and again to rendering the *allées* of beech and linden at

Schleissheim and the mass of its low houses seen through a bewildering entanglement of twigs and branches.

Mr. Bell tells me that he occasionally worked on wet charcoal paper stretched over a large slate, to produce a certain effect, sometimes wetting the sticks of charcoal themselves. It is said that this method suggested itself to him one day when he was caught in a shower and the raindrops made interesting splotches of tone on his paper. He was as quick to see suggestions in accident as Leonardo to discover compositions in the veinings of marble or the stains on walls.

Somehow we do not expect the painter who wields so broad a brush to express himself with ease and dexterity by the needle, although we recall Duveneck's conspicuous success. Curiously, however, Currier is entirely at home in etching, and his plates, though barely more than a dozen, are as unique and charming in their way as his work in other mediums. All but one are landscapes, on plates very long in proportion to their height, the subjects usually rows of houses, a bare tree here and there, with the pattern of windows, roof tiles, or fences to enliven the design. They are executed with Whistler's economy of means, not by the elaborate cross-hatchings of an etcher like Samuel Palmer. They are delicate, suggestive, firm and well knit in their design, and all in the bitten line. As far as any record shows they were all done in the year 1883.

As we have seen, Currier deliberately avoided the blaze of noonday and the monotony of a clear blue sky, and this, I think, exemplifies his exceptional tonal sense, for Currier was intuitive in his feeling for those nuances that lie between the positive hues. Here also his painting is closely related to music, for a true sense of tone is temperamental and does not depend upon sharp eyes or ears but rather upon a supersensitive

spirit. It explains, I think, his love of dark backgrounds, where his low-toned portrait heads emerge with such dignity from their deep atmospheric envelope, and reveals why his landscapes are so often somber though never dull. In the realm of color they are sonorous as organ music. They suggest far-fetched analogies like Persian enamels, the rich glazes of Japanese pottery, or the indefinable gilded gloom of the interior of Saint Mark's in Venice. Truth to Nature of course enters into all this, but it is never a literal adherence to facts. And whatever may be the limitations of his art, it is the never-failing expression of a most sensitive as well as a most impulsive and dynamic nature. The man who could convey so much emotion and fiery enthusiasm for the passing pageant was a genius, and he has left us a heritage of beauty which will find its home in any age where appreciation rises above fashion, where light falls, canvas endures, and colors do not fade.

APPENDIX

ANY list of Currier's paintings made at this time must perforce be incomplete because so many of his pictures have either disappeared without a trace or been destroyed. As I have shown, Currier often abandoned his sketches and studies in moving from one studio to another. A number of his works are known to exist, but they have eluded every attempt to trace them during the time devoted to this book. For example, I have so far been unable to find the present owners of the eleven paintings by Currier formerly in the collection of the late William M. Chase, which were sold at auction in 1912 and 1917. The largest collection of Curriers in private hands belongs to his family. The Cincinnati Museum owns the largest group of Currier's work in a public gallery, which consists of three oils, three water colors, and six charcoals. These were given to the Museum by his friends Frank Duveneck, L. H. Meakin, Vincent Nowotny, Edward A. Bell, W. J. Baer, and Mrs. John W. Alexander.

He is also represented in the following museums and private collections: The Art Association of Indianapolis, Indiana, the Boston Art Club, the Brooklyn Museum, the Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh, the City Art Museum of St. Louis, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the collections of: Mr. Horace R. Burdick of Malden, Massachusetts; Mrs. John N. Carey of Indianapolis, Indiana; Mr. Charles H. Currier of Roxbury, Massachusetts; the Estate of the late William Forsyth of Indianapolis, Indiana; Mr. H. Helbig of Munich; Mr. Reginald Poland of San Diego, California; the Estate of the late Jacob Stern of San Francisco, California; Nelson C. White of Waterford, Connecticut; and Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Withrow of Santa Clara, California.

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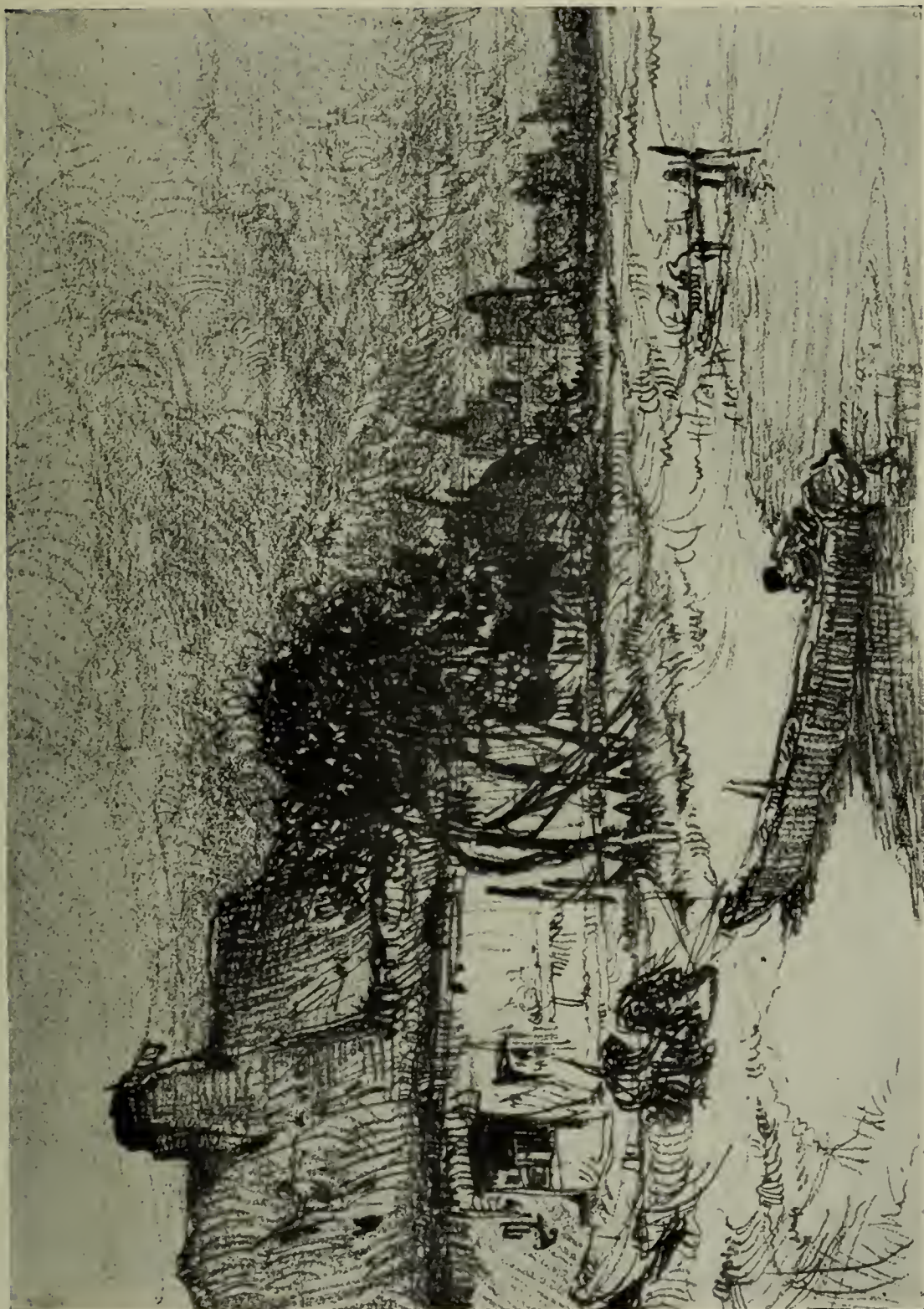
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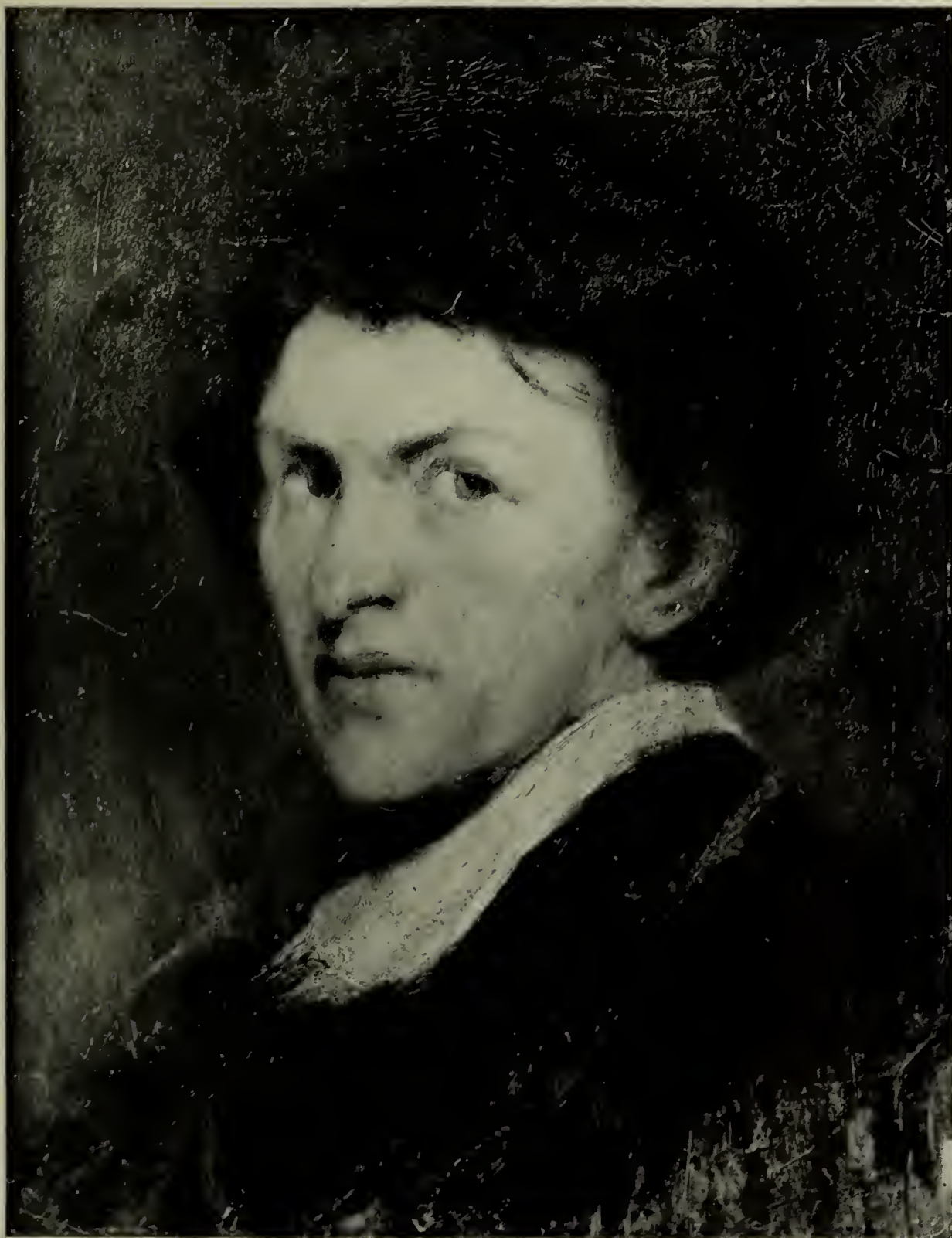
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UNFINISHED NUDE



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STUDY OF A COW



LANDSCAPE



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CANAL AT DACHAU



A MUNICH BOY



THE PAINTING CLASS. AMERICANS AT DACHAU



WHISTLING BOY



LANDSCAPE



HEAD OF A BOY



LANDSCAPE



STILL LIFE



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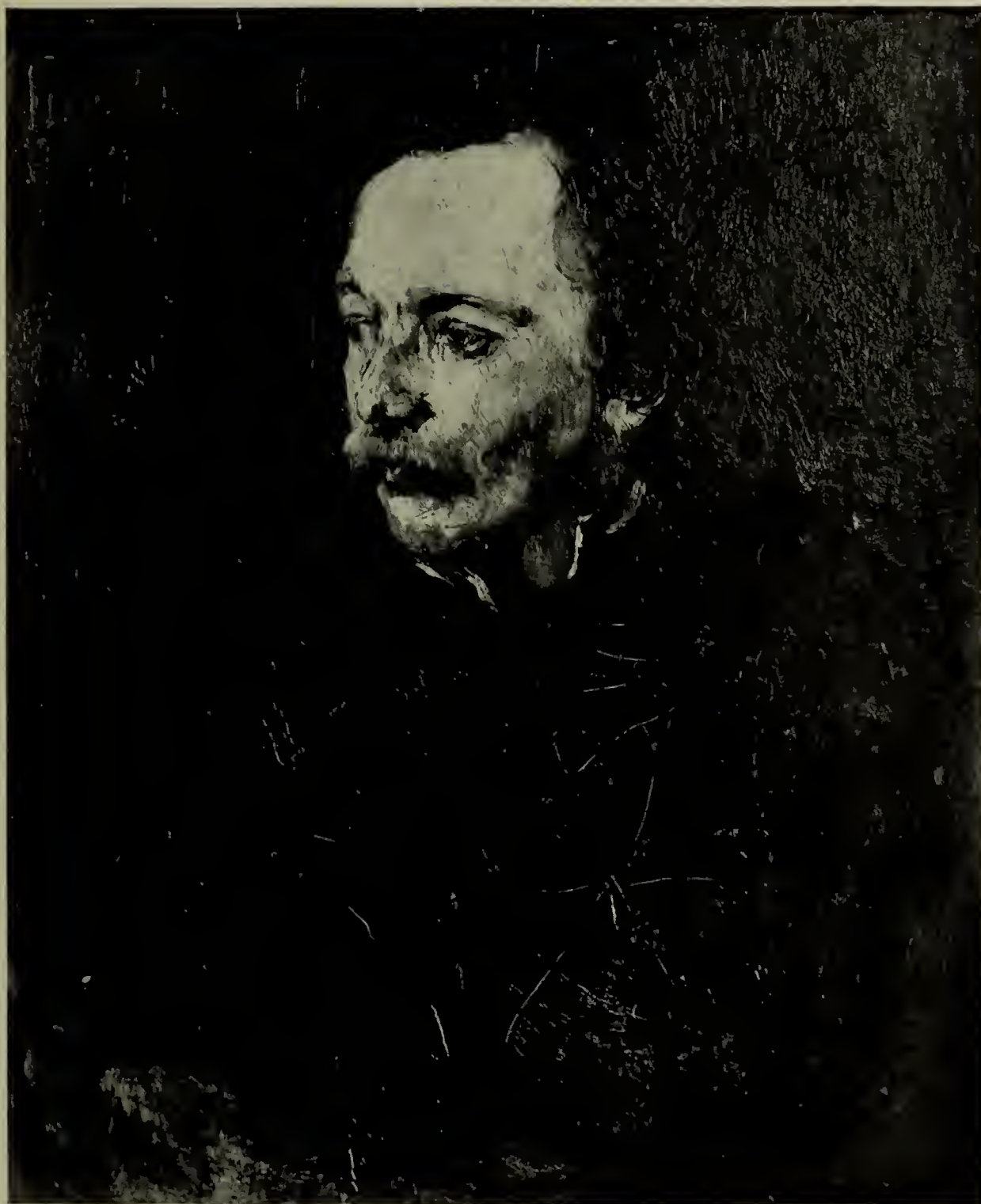


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Franklin. Munich. 84.

LANDSCAPE. MUNICH



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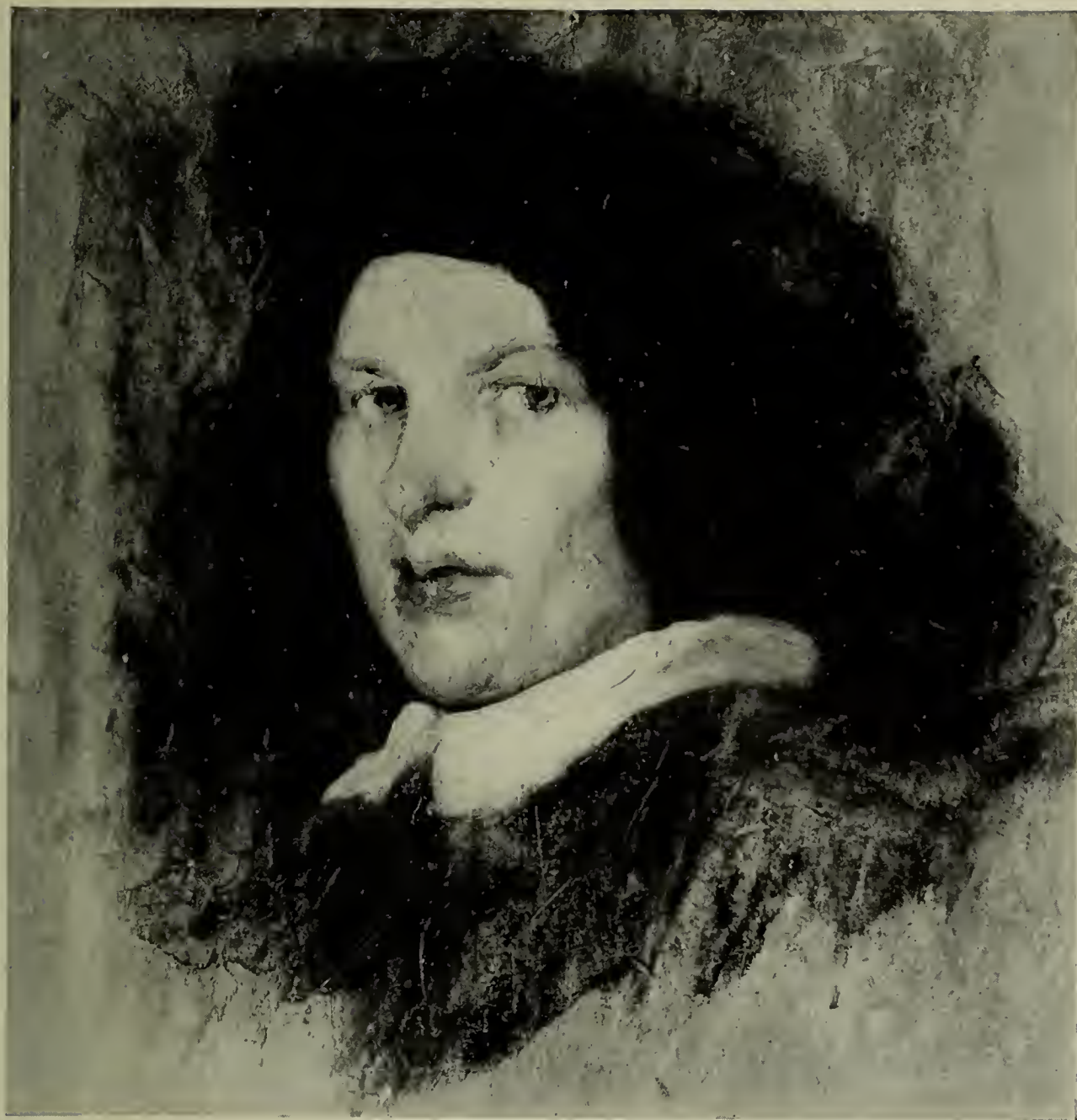
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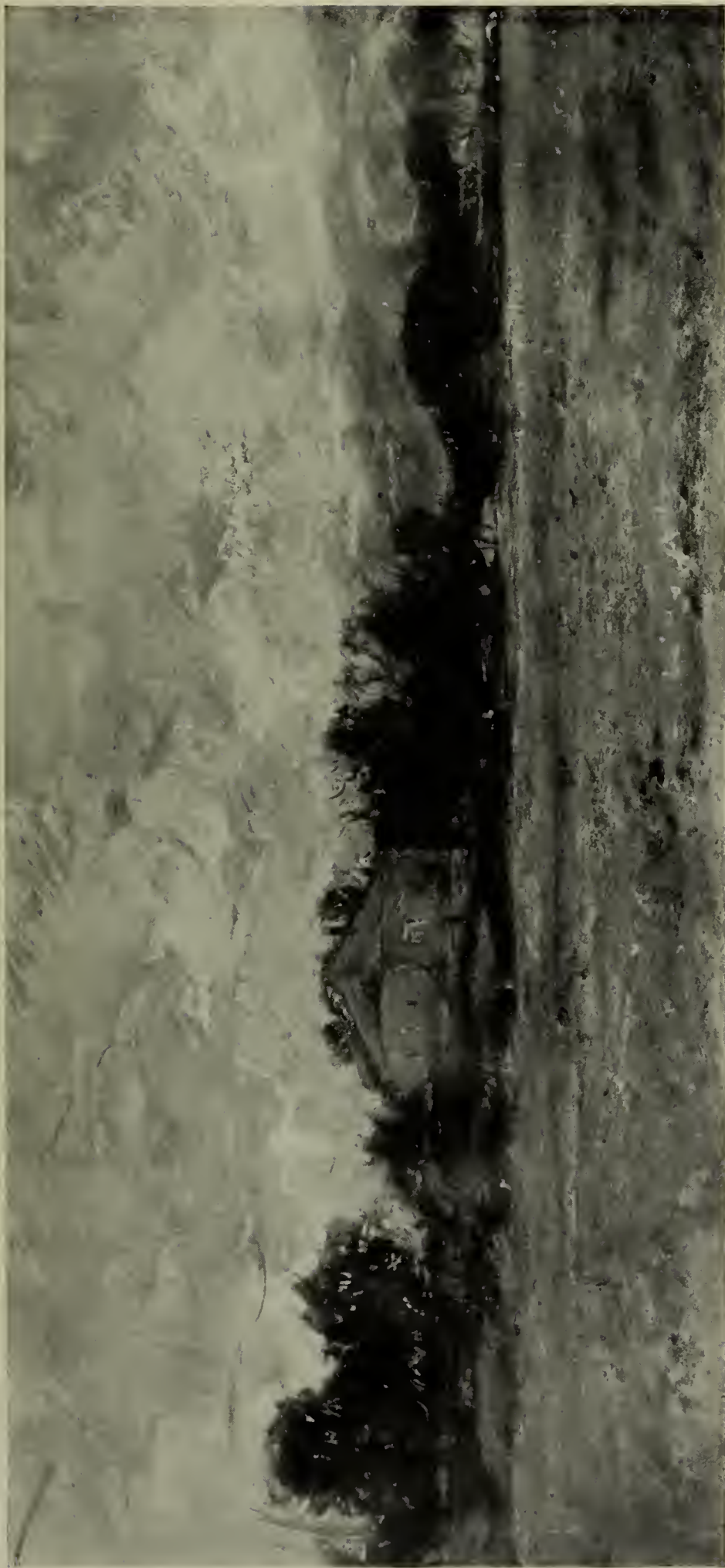
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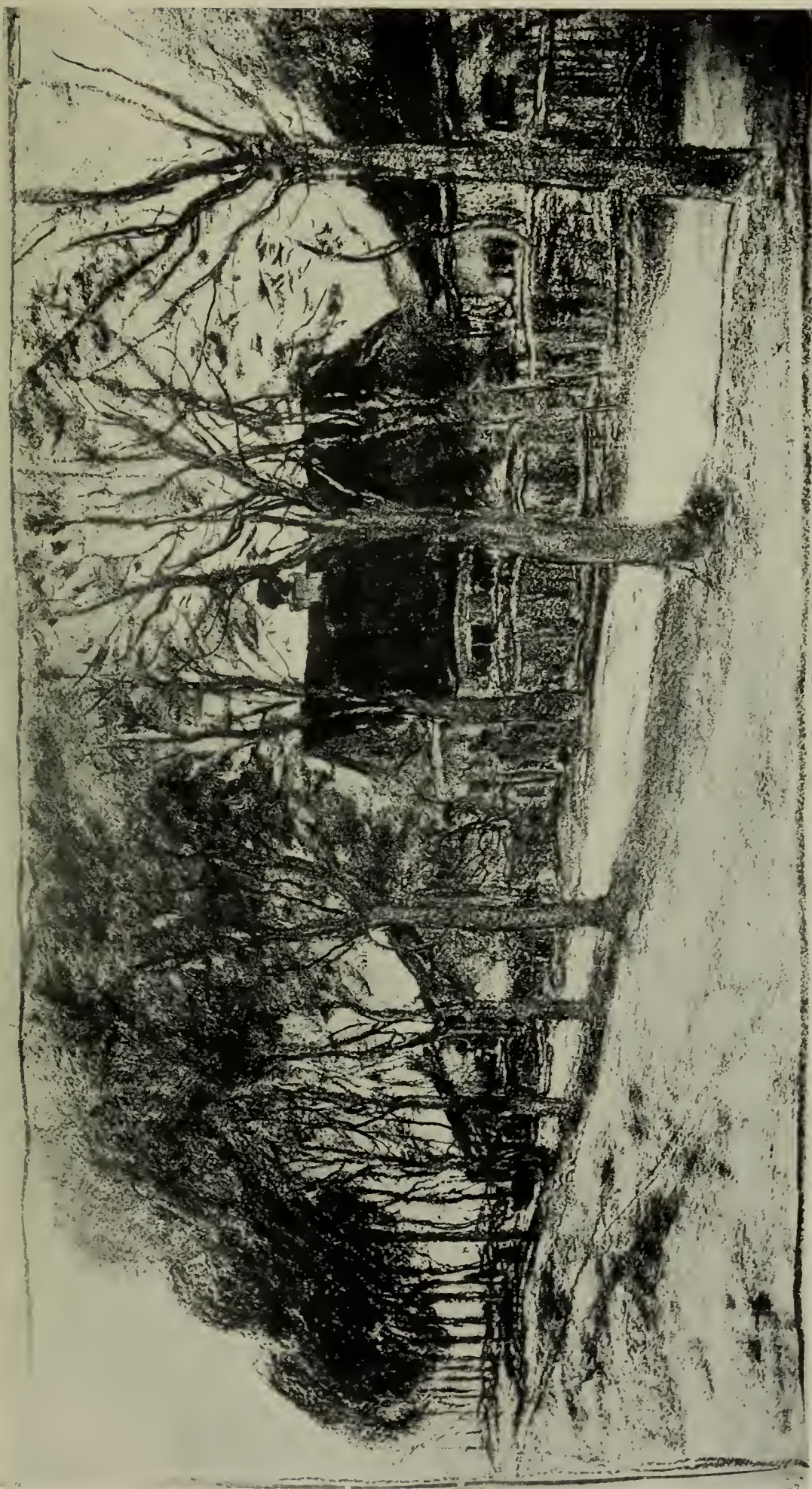
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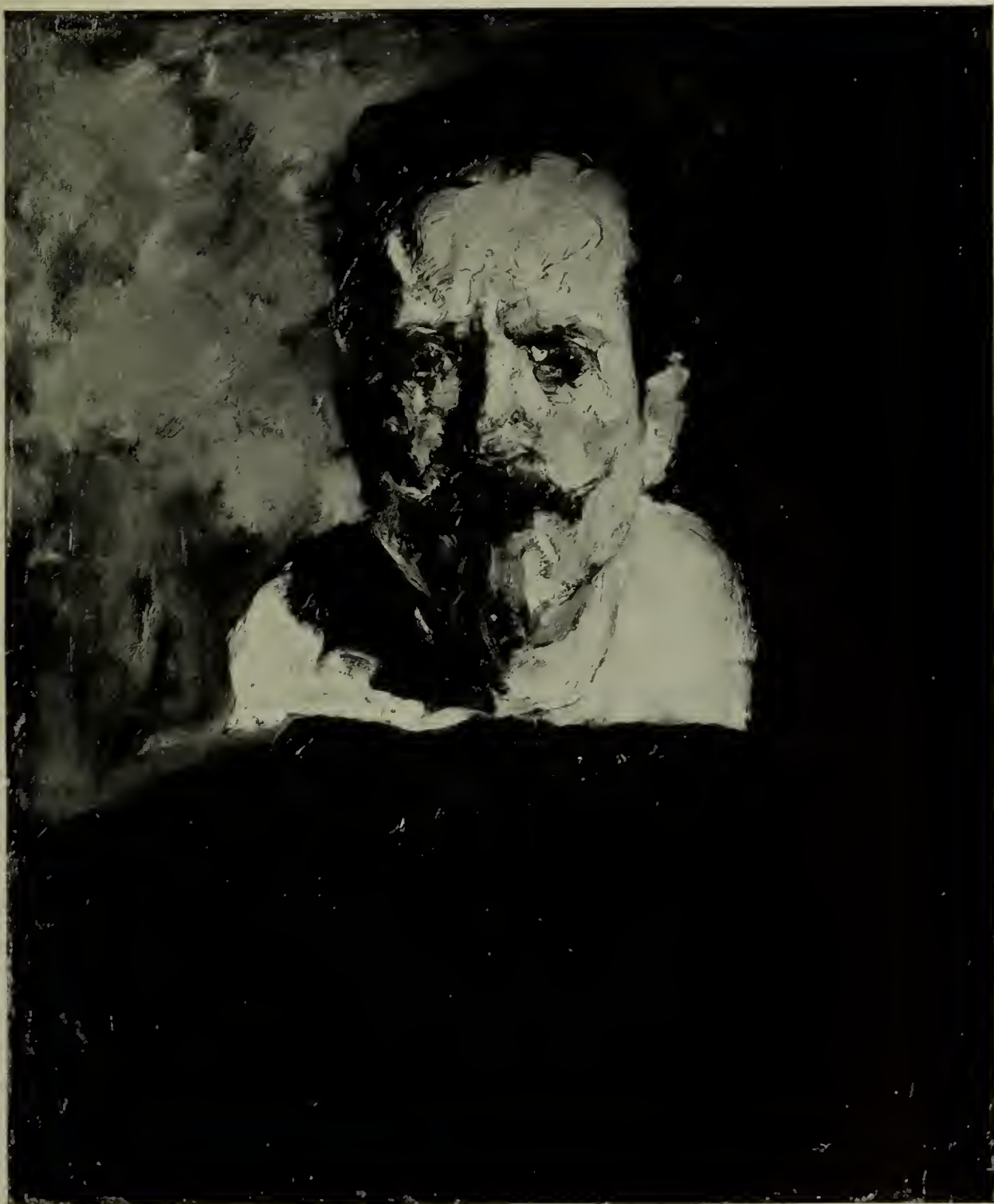
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THE POTTERY VENDER



STREET AT SCHLEISSHEIM



HEAD OF A MAN



Frank C. ... 81

SKETCH



HEAD OF A BOY



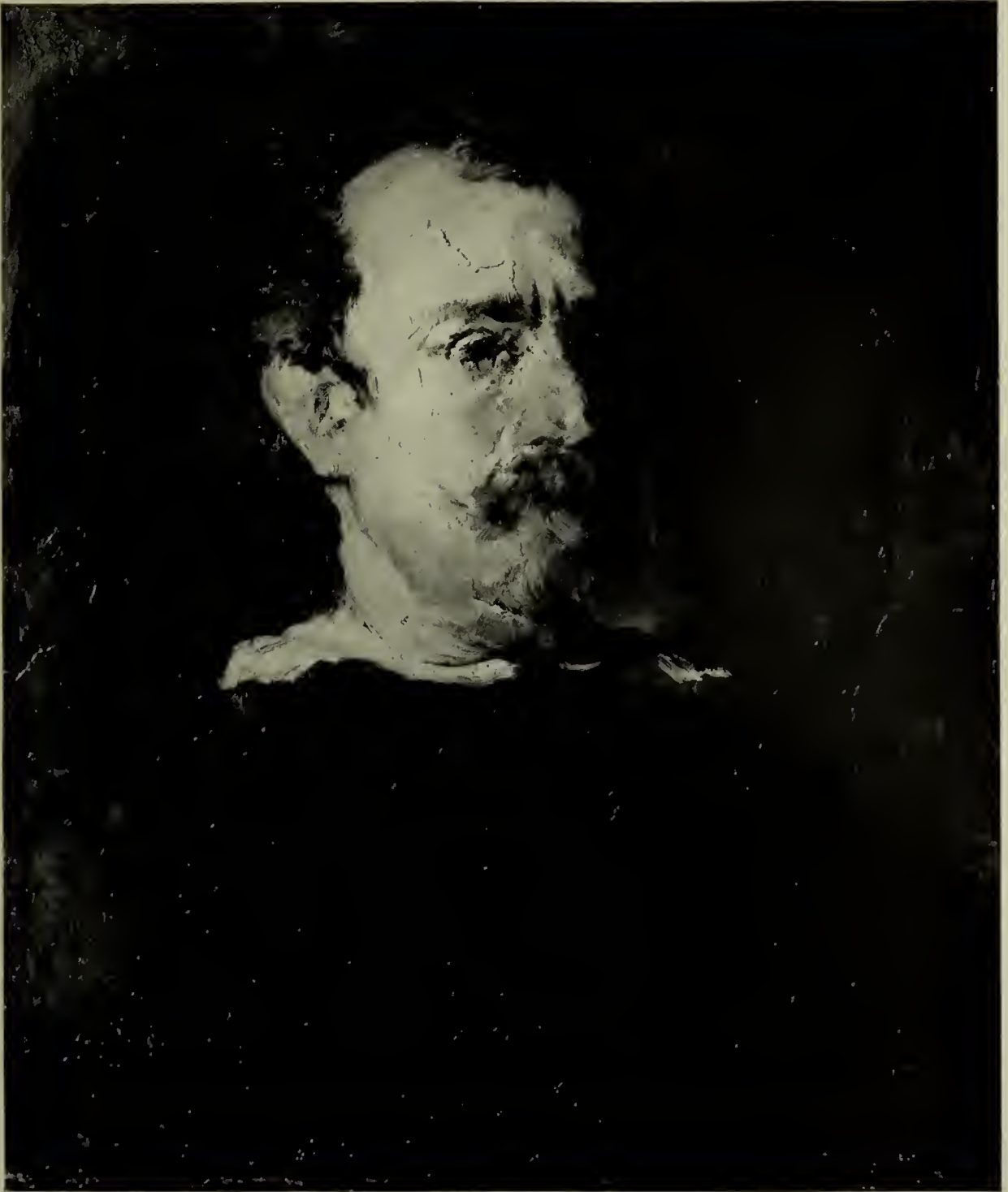
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SKETCH



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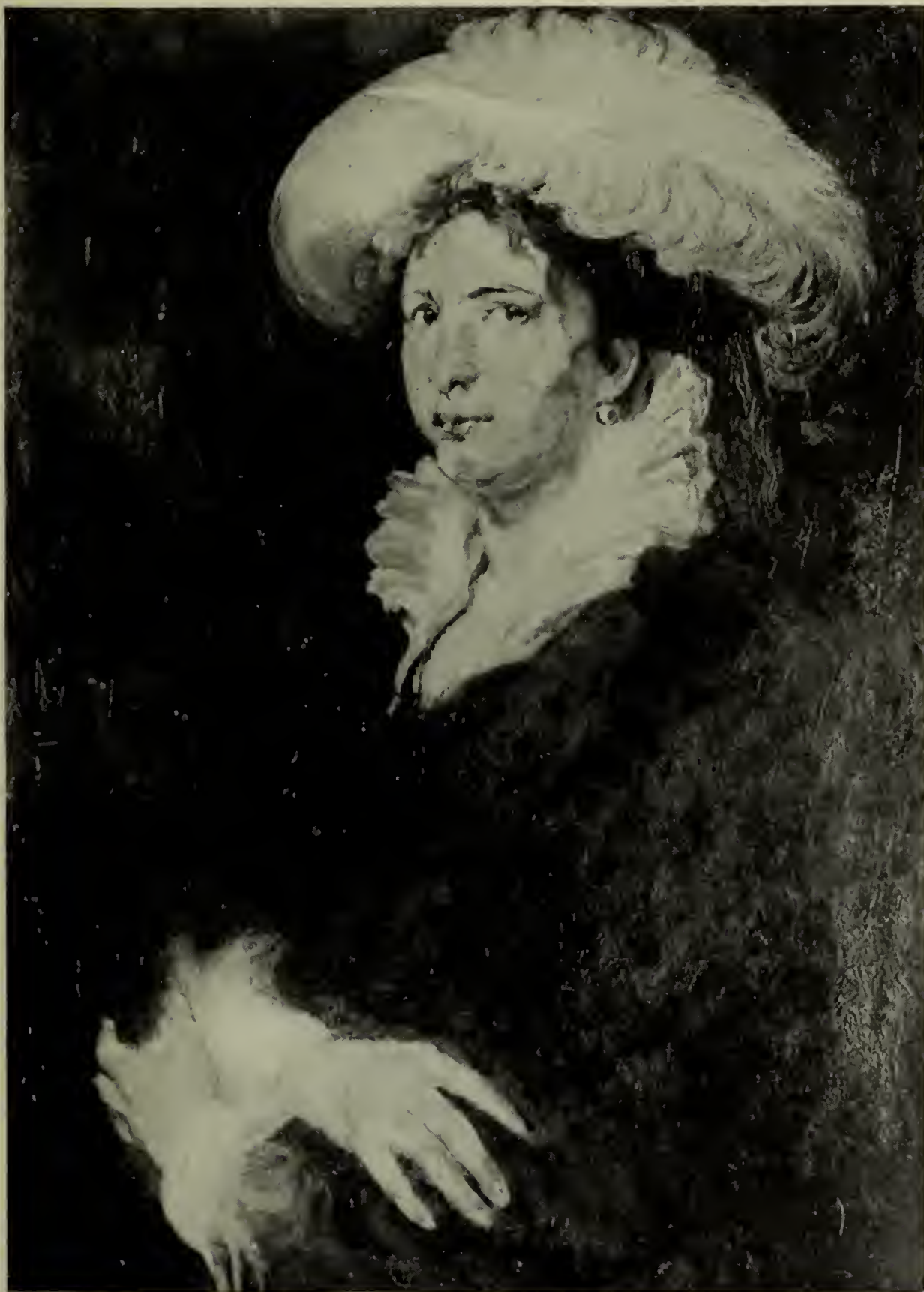
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BOY WITH RUFF



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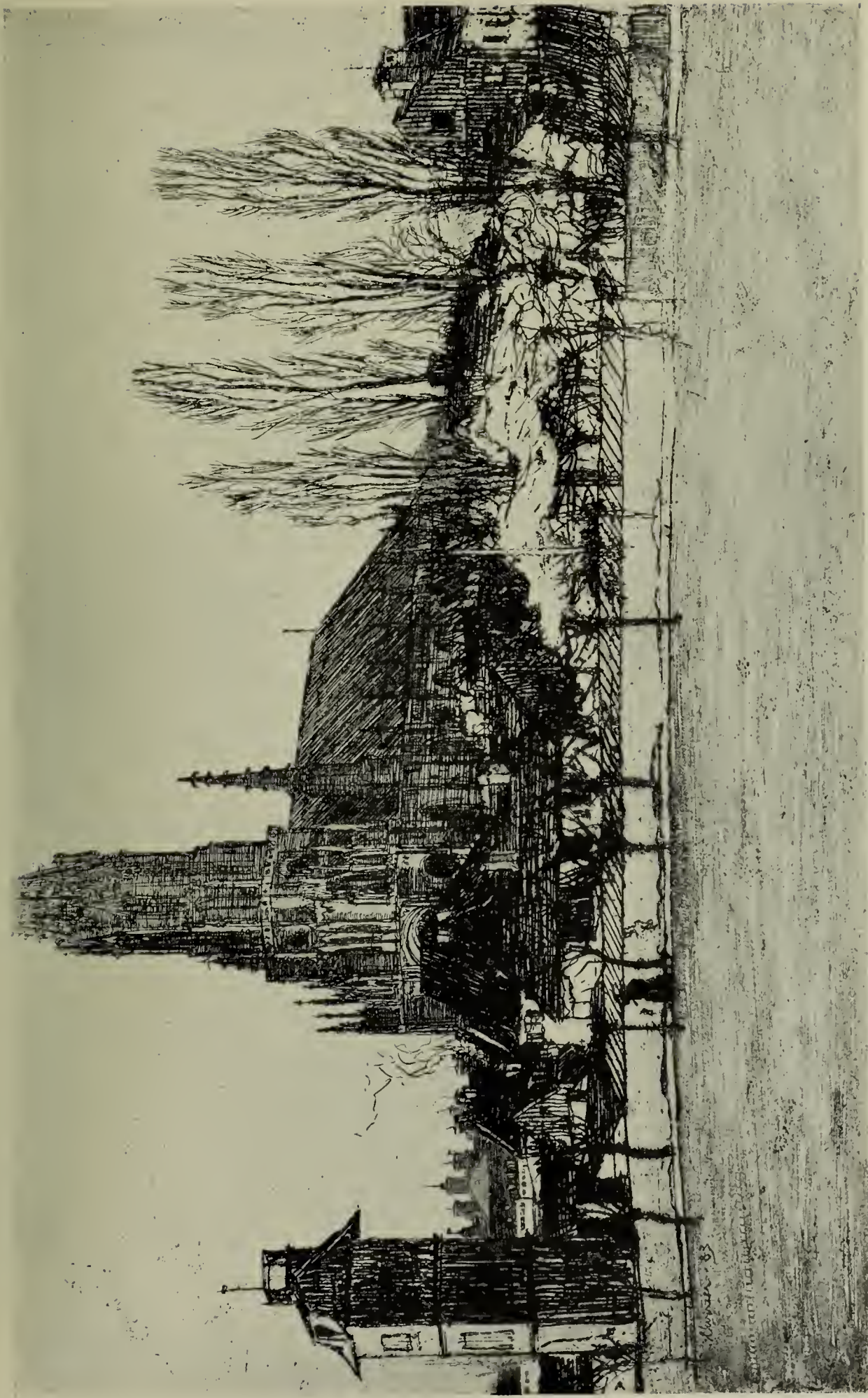
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SKETCH



PORTRAIT OF A MAN



THE GOTHIC CHURCH



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TREES



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